

# From Saviour to Perpetrator – and Back to Saviour?



## HOW TO PREVENT SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE BY UNITED NATIONS PERSONNEL

Alina-Anna Josephson  
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## INSECURE LIVELIHOODS SERIES

The Insecure Livelihoods Series publishes independent and field-driven information and analysis on the complexity of conflict and security in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Its reports are based on independent, non-partisan and collaborative research.

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Cover photo: UN vehicle in the mud

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# Executive Summary

Sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by United Nations (UN) personnel was first documented in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in 2004 (Larson & Dodds 2017) and has since been a violation the organization has been criticized for (Felter & Renwick 2021). Although there is no unified definition of the broader concept of sexual violence, the UN has its definition for SEA. “Sexual exploitation” is defined as any possible power or trust abuse for sexual purposes as well as other abusive manipulative forms of sexual violence; and “sexual abuse” is defined as the actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions (United Nations Secretariat 2003: 1). Despite numerous preventive measures implemented by the UN, some of which have been successful, the issue is still very prevalent (United Nations 2022b).

Addressing the case of the eastern DRC, this paper attempts to find new ways of addressing SEA by focusing on grassroots solutions and the perspectives of diverse actors. The outcomes of the analysis conclude a set of suggestions focusing on justice, education, empowerment, institutional change, and a shift in the UN-DRC relationship that can be summarized into the following recommendations:

- Protecting UN employees from SEA. The UN needs to address the SEA cases against their own personnel and put educational and monitoring measures in place, as well as provide psychological support.
- Further and broader educational policies, especially on sexual violence. The emphasis on education and sensitization of sexual violence needs to be further targeted, especially by covering the current loopholes and grey areas.
- Transforming the way perpetrators are prosecuted and how justice is served. An example would be prosecuting the perpetrators in the region where the misconduct occurred. This would require cooperation between national actors and the UN.
- Empowering impoverished vulnerable groups and narrowing inequality between international and national actors. This could be achieved through further education, investments in jobs, as well as providing a living wage.
- UN employee-based community building and giving back to the host population and its communities.

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# Introduction

The United Nations (UN) has been present in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) for decades, and its military operation (today known as MONUSCO) has operated in the region since 1999 (United Nations 2022c). In the past, the UN has been criticized for human rights violations (Felter & Renwick 2021), one of which being sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA). The UN has responded by altering its recruitment, training, and in-field techniques and improving transparency, accountability, and support measures (United Nations 2022a). Although these measures have been impactful, they have not been able to end SEA, leaving unanswered the question of how to move forward. In fact, the DRC accounts for one-third of all (reported) SEA allegations worldwide (Fraulin et al. 2021: 2), making it a significant case.

With a case study on the North and South Kivu regions, this paper addresses the question: “How can sexual exploitation and abuse by United Nations personnel be prevented?” The three sub-questions are: 1) What are Congolese general perceptions of the United Nations and sexual violence? 2) Which current UN measures have been rated successful? and 3) How can sexual exploitation and abuse be prevented? The research is an explorative empirical study, putting forward an empirical contribution through inductive thematic content analysis. The methods used in this analytical-qualitative case study are semi- and unstructured interviews conducted during four weeks in April 2022 in North and South Kivu. In total, the study includes 28 interview participants.<sup>1</sup> The initial connection with participants was made with the help

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<sup>1</sup> Sixteen Congolese civilians, two Congolese activists, two Congolese service providers, two Congolese NGO employees, two Congolese researchers, one former MONUSCO employee, one MONUSCO CDT representative, and two other UN representatives.

of personal and academic contacts, who agreed to facilitate the process by approaching their contacts in the UN, public services and the fields of activism and journalism. Further connections were brought into the study with the help of word-of-mouth recommendations and direct introductions.

The authors aim to put forward new narratives and suggestions for combating SEA, focusing on the different perspectives of the participants. As will be shown, SEA is multilayered and involves different international and national players. Therefore, the preventive measures must always incorporate perspectives from the different actors directly or indirectly involved, and this paper aims at providing this cross-cutting analysis. Although there are limits to this study, as certain groups were not accessible,<sup>2</sup> the perspectives provided suggest legitimate ideas in combating SEA. Additionally, the discussions put forward showcase that sexual violence is a theoretically complex issue and should be given more attention. With the help of the literature review, the authors show that the discussion on sexual violence is not only about the act itself. When speaking about sexual violence, the narrative changes based on the actors involved, the context, the power relations, and the type of sexual violence (Nordås & Kaz 2021), which makes it much harder to conceptualize.

The paper is organized as follows: section two introduces the conceptual framework of sexual violence, touching on the various understandings of the topic within the literature. Section three presents a short overview of previous experience with violence in the eastern DRC. Section four gives an overview of the literature on SEA in DRC. Section five contains the methods used for the data collection, including information on how the participants were recruited and the ethical considerations. Section six presents the data analysis and results, and section seven provides further discussion, both of which connect to the literature presented in sections two and three. The policy recommendations and conclusion are presented in section eight.

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<sup>2</sup> Such as survivors of SEA, government officials, or UN police and military personnel.

## Conceptual Framework: Sexual Violence

As this paper addresses the issue of SEA/sexual violence, it must first be determined what is meant by this terminology. A unified definition of sexual violence is yet to be established, and there are different views on what should and should not be included. There is agreement on including rape as a form of sexual violence. Beyond this, the discourse is less even, as some views include nonviolent forms, such as harassment and inappropriate sexual comments, while others do not (Nordås & Cohen 2021). Cohen & Nordås (2014) refer to the Sexual Violence in Armed Conflicts (SVAC) data set which provides some consistency on what is meant by sexual violence. Indeed, within its definition of sexual violence, the SVAC set includes rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization/abortion, sexual mutilation, and sexual torture. Although this data set is a significant step in unifying the definition of sexual violence, it only focuses on sexual violence in armed conflicts.

To provide some understanding of the various points of view within the literature, Nordås & Kaz (2021) differentiate the literature into two groups. The first one focuses on men as perpetrators and addresses why women are targeted. Within this, the main arguments are that rape is a weapon of war (for instance Kohn 1994; Card 1996; Pratt & Werchick 2004; Farwell 2004; Diken & Bagge Laustsen 2005; Rittner & Roth 2012; Stark & Wessells 2012; Ceretti 2016) and an instrument of genocide – argued based on examples from

previous genocides (for instance MacKinnon 1994; Sharlach 2000; Russell-Brown 2003; Reid-Cunningham 2008; Sitkin et al. 2019). Further research (Farwell 2004) concludes that sexual violence is a natural effect of war and conflict due to men's sexual urges. However, the idea of rape as a weapon of war has been criticized; the idea of sexual violence being a natural effect of war or conflict has been contradicted by academic arguments (Eriksson Baaz & Stern 2013: 19); and scholars (such as Brownmiller 1975; Seifert 1996; Gottschall 2004; Wood 2006) have referred to the idea of sexual violence as a method of domination and suppression. Further scholars (for instance Card 1996; Enloe 2000) argue that wartime sexual violence is a continuation of peacetime political, social, and economic suppression and that sexual violence is a sign of patriarchy. This argument of the continuation of violence and oppression is still very prominent (Nordås & Kaz 2021: 196), and Boesten (2014), for example, elaborates further on the "continuum of patriarchy".

The second group is led by research on the variations of sexual violence across conflicts, actors, forms of violence, target group identities, and locations. This research also concentrates on finding out why these variations within sexual violence exist, which has led the research into new dimensions. For example, some literature (for instance Wood 2006, 2009; Olsson et al. 2020) concludes that there is a significant variation in the types of sexual violence, even within one country. Furthermore, other research (for instance McDermott 2020; Cohen 2013, 2016; Wood 2006, 2009, 2010) touches on the so-called "negative" cases,<sup>3</sup> which consequently forces the researchers to think of new methods and ways to collect data, and impacts how this data is viewed (Nordås & Kaz 202: 197).

As the two main groups of argumentations are limited, Karim & Beardsley (2017) and Westendorf (2020) suggest that future work should be conducted on the wider set of actors that are part of the state's "coercive apparatus" both at home and abroad – including research on sexual violations by UN personnel. Although there is no unified understanding of sexual violence, the UN has determined its definition of SEA. The UN zero-tolerance policy defines "sexual exploitation" as "any actual or attempted abuse of a position

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<sup>3</sup> "Negative cases" are cases that are not reported.

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” (United Nations Secretariat 2003: 1). Additionally, the term “sexual abuse” is defined as “the actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions” (United Nations Secretariat 2003: 1). Even though the UN has its own definition for SEA, troop/police contributing countries (T/PCCs) have their own ideas of what constitutes sexual violence.

A further aspect of the literature on sexual violence that needs to be touched on is its colonial aspect. In their studies, Scully (1995) and Kolsky (2010) state that colonialism created the conditions of pervasive rape. More prominently, Stoler (2010) puts forward evidence that during colonial rule acts of sexual violence against “lesser races” were tacitly ignored and rape became customary. The specific sanctions and prohibitions on sex clearly defined the boundaries and limits of the individual’s power as well as defined the personal and public boundaries of “race” (Stoler 2010: 42). For example, White men were able to act with impunity whereas Black men were prosecuted for similar actions. Additionally, in various colonized regions, race-specific laws were put in place to specifically punish Black men and subordinate Black women (Ingris 1975; Boutilier 1984; Stoller 2010: 58). Furthermore, colonial persistence/success and the categories “colonized” and “colonizer” became entrenched with the help of sexual control and power (Stoller 2010: 42). Although these colonial settings might not seem relevant to today’s discourses, Benson & Chadya (2005) argue that colonial legacies influence today’s sexual violence trials, which is why it is important to incorporate the historical analyses into today’s discussions. This perspective will be incorporated into the discussion and is an important point to factor into future measures on preventing SEA.

The above arguments make it clear that the idea of sexual violence is broad and unspecific and is therefore difficult to work with, especially in the context of the previously colonized DRC. To arrive at a more contextual definition, interviews with Congolese participants included a section where they could share their definition of sexual violence. According to Congolese participants, sexual violence is:

- an act towards someone (any sex and gender) without their consent;
- a moral, verbal, economic, physical, or psychological act;
- an act (or an attempt) of physical violence, penetration, harassment, inappropriate touching, kissing, manipulation, or inappropriate comments and messages;
- used to build fear and manipulate;
- an everyday global issue.

Additionally, it was highlighted that sexual violence can happen within a marriage or with close family and friends. It was also mentioned that poverty plays a vital role in sexual violence, as people tend to do bad things in difficult situations, which is why sexual violence is not only an act against the survivor but includes the perpetrator's difficulties.

The concept of sexual violence is complex and is differentiated in the literature from SEA. The UN's definition of SEA, as can be seen, fits into the general category of sexual violence, especially within the understanding of Congolese participants. Therefore, this paper argues that SEA fits into the broad category of sexual violence and should be categorized as such. The term "SEA" will be used in this paper for consistency, but the authors argue that SEA should be referred to as what it is – sexual violence.

# 3 |

## Past Experience with and the Normalization of Violence in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo

To contextualize the setting of SEA in the eastern DRC, it is necessary to first gain an understanding of the past experiences with violence in the region. Verweijen (2019: 16–30) provides a thorough explanation of four critical periods: the rise of system-D (*système-D*) (1970s–1980s), violent resourcefulness (*débrouillardise*) (1980s–1990s), urban militarization (1994–2003), and ongoing insecurity (2003–present). These are periods within a continuum of insecurity involving the presence and mixing of armed groups and military, all of which contribute to today's insecurity. This was sparked by rising economic insecurity, which led many to fend for themselves and eventually find new ways to survive, such as monetizing relationships (1970s–1990s), followed by the rise in the number of refugees and military officers present, due to the Rwandan genocide and the Congo wars (1994–2003).<sup>4</sup> The chaotic consequences of attempting to unite the fighting parties and to disarm and demobilize combatants resulted in the construction of a structure for violence, including sexual violence (2003–present). Additionally, the stationing of

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<sup>4</sup> During the Congo wars violence became an important factor for social regulation (Verweijen 2019: 25).

UN military forces has been a further addition to the military presence.<sup>5</sup> Thus, for generations, violence has been present in daily life (Verweijen 2019: 31).

The four above periods caused uncertainty and insecurity, which provided a setting for violence to emerge within the society. One of the types of violence that has become present in daily life is sexual violence. The DRC has become known internationally over the years for the many alleged reports of sexual violence (Eriksson Baaz & Stern 2010: 7) and has been labelled the “rape capital of the world” (Lewis 2021). International organizations have put forward figures of (conflict-related) sexual violence in the DRC according to which roughly 30,000 sexual violence cases are addressed by humanitarian actors on a yearly basis (UNICEF 2023; Hounton & Dalmonte 2019). Additionally, the 2007 DRC Demographic and Health Survey concludes that approximately 1.69–1.8 million women aged 15–49 in the DRC have experienced sexual violence (Peterman et al. 2011: 1063). Furthermore, in their population-based study in the eastern DRC, Johnson et al. (2010) conclude that 37.5 percent of participating women have experienced sexual violence.<sup>6</sup> Due to gender inequality in the eastern DRC, men are often the family’s decision-makers, which often results in women and girls not coming forward, as it might lead to negative consequences (Lussy et al. 2021: 7) such as stigmatization or being rejected by their husbands (Freedman 2011: 171). Therefore, gathering data on sexual violence in the region has its limitations, and this must be kept in mind when viewing the presented numbers.

As Verweijen (2019: 31–39) put forward, some reasons why people turn to violence today are insecurity, competition, poverty, conflicts, gender roles, and (dis)respect. Sexual violence perpetrated by armed groups, it is argued, is used as a tactic to assert control over natural resources in the region (United Nations 2023). Additionally, in the study by Eriksson Baaz & Stern (2010: 48), some militias referred to “buying prostitutes” if they had the financial means for it, and if a soldier paid for a “prostitute”, it was not considered rape. Instead, this was seen as “normal” and a way of performing and living up to the ideals

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<sup>5</sup> MONUC since 1999, which was renamed MONUSCO in 2010.

<sup>6</sup> The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that roughly 30 percent of women worldwide have experienced sexual violence (World Health Organization 2011).

of masculinity. This shows that sexual violence can be seen as a means to live up to societal expectations and gender roles or is used as a competition/power move or tactic.

Although there is a significant number of cases perpetrated by armed groups, Freedman (2011: 170–171) points out that this sexual violence should not be viewed as a natural effect of conflict and argues that sexual violence in the region has been “normalized” due to the lack of sanctions as well as impunity at all levels. Furthermore, in the context of the eastern DRC, women are faced with poor socio-economic standing and gender norms, giving them a “second-class” status, which often gets reinforced by sexual violence (Freedman 2011: 174). Additionally, Lussy et al. (2021: 2) argue that gender norms, as well as the normalization of sexual violence over time, have most likely contributed to the normalization of civilian-perpetrated sexual violence. In fact, a 2006–2008 HEAL Africa analysis concluded that 77 percent of their patients’ perpetrators were civilians and often someone they knew (Lussy et al. 2021: 6).<sup>7</sup> These sources thus argue that the significant causes for the sexual violence emanate from gender roles, the normalization of violence and impunity. Additionally, this argument supports the conceptual framework of sexual violence, by holding that sexual violence, even in a conflict setting, is not merely a weapon of war.

An interesting point to consider is the role of international actors, especially the UN. Verweijen (2019) includes the UN military presence in the four periods of the continuum of insecurity presented above. This is a significant factor to consider, as there have been violent clashes between the UN and Congolese in recent years. The Congolese feel a strong mistrust of and frustration towards the UN, especially towards MONUSCO (Kniknie 2022). This frustration results from the failure of the UN to protect civilians from violence by armed groups, as well as the UN’s/MONUSCO’s perceived inaction regarding the intensifying conflict. International troops and expats exacerbate inequality in the region, as international troops often enjoy a better standard of living than the Congolese population and are often perceived as profiting from the misfortune of the eastern DRC and its people (Kniknie 2022;

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<sup>7</sup> HEAL Africa is a non-governmental hospital in Goma, North Kivu.

Weenink 2022). Additionally, Congolese political actors have openly voiced their mistrust of the UN (Kniknie 2022) and have at times been involved in conducting misinformation campaigns regarding MONUSCO's mission and its activities (Trithart 2022: 4), adding to the general mistrust and frustration. All in all, the UN presence is not perceived by the eastern DRC's population as preventing conflicts and instability but is instead seen as profiting economically and politically from them. This frustration has led to outbreaks of violence and further exacerbates the region's general insecurity.

This overview has provided important insights into the context of the eastern DRC. The region has been afflicted by a continuous period of instability, where multiple and cumulative factors have led to the normalization of violence. It has been argued that this insecurity is one of the causes of sexual violence, with other causes being gender roles, impunity, societal expectations, power dynamics, internal tensions, and the aforementioned normalization of violence.

# 4 |

## Sexual Exploitation

## and Abuse by

## United Nations Personnel

SEA has been an issue since the first peacekeeping operation in the 1990s. However, SEA in the DRC first became public in 2004 (Larson & Dodds 2017). Since then, it has been perpetrated by various UN personnel, especially by peacekeeping organization (PKO) personnel.<sup>8</sup> SEA data is generally hard to come by; the UN Conduct and Discipline Unit (CDU) provides a database, but it only covers information on SEA perpetrated by PKOs. Even though the database does not give the full picture, it is a good start and provides some understanding of the issue. According to the UN (United Nations 2022b), MONUC and MONUSCO operations are responsible for roughly one-third of the allegations made worldwide. As the goal of UN operations is to prevent conflict and high-risk situations and provide a sense of protection within societies, it is crucial for SEA (and any misconduct) to be prevented (Rubin 2018). In general, all UN personnel are in the field to protect civilians (United Nations 2022d); them perpetrating such human rights violations is not acceptable on any level.

Because the topic of SEA is highly complex, it is essential to note that although this research focuses on SEA perpetrated against the host population, the issue is more far-reaching, as there is a significant number of such violations taking place within the UN, as a study by Donnelly et al. (2022) concludes. Although the target population differs, the issue remains the same. PKOs often operate in what are often seen as “zones of exception”

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<sup>8</sup> This paper will focus on all UN personnel. However, as it appears from the data and interview participant’s input, peacekeepers are the main UN perpetrators.

due to the deployment lasting only for a year, and they are thus not seen as “real” experiences. Within the whole process, there is a lack of consideration of the psychological needs of UN personnel, which is problematic mainly because the resulting failure to meet those needs causes many to violate specific regulations (Donnelly et al. 2022: 13).

The following overview of SEA is divided into statistics on PKOs, followed by a sub-section focusing on the group most affected by this misconduct, as well as an overview of already implemented measures by the UN to combat SEA.

#### **4.1. United Nations Peacekeeping Operation Statistics**

This section examines UN mission statistics on SEA (United Nations 2022b), which only consider violations perpetrated by PKO personnel. This electronic database was set up in 2008, with the earliest data from 2007, and shows received reports, which can include one or more perpetrators and one or more survivors (United Nations 2022b). Data can be viewed in five ways: allegations received, alleged perpetrators, “victims”, investigations, and actions taken. Another way to filter the data is based on mission, year, personnel category, or uniformed personnel nationality. The following statistics have been filtered for MONUC and MONUSCO missions, leaving the other filters blank.

As shown in Graph 1, the number of yearly reported SEA cases has gone down significantly since 2009. However, the trend seems to be an overall back-and-forth shift, especially between 2014 and early 2022. Additionally, the graph only indicates when the incident was reported, not when it took place. Graph 2 provides more information on the type of allegation made, whether the incident was sexual abuse, exploitation, or both. In general, these statistics show that the most common case of SEA is sexual exploitation. Of the total 268 allegations made between 2010 and early 2022, a total of 151 concerned sexual exploitation, 108 concerned sexual abuse, and nine concerned both. Graph 3 shows the top ten home countries of the alleged military perpetrators (2015–early 2022):<sup>9</sup> South Africa is first, and the difference between South Africa and the following countries is significant. The United

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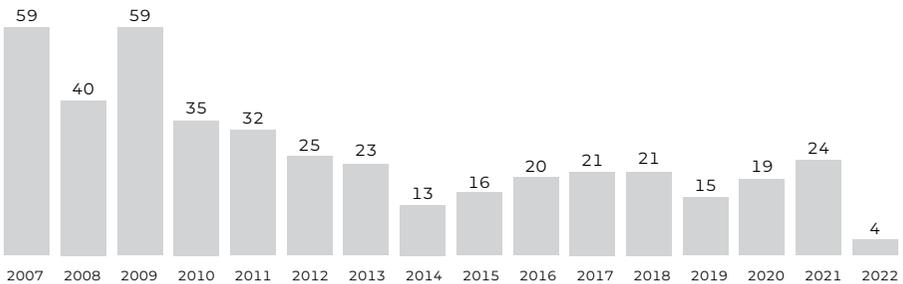
<sup>9</sup> Only the top ten nationalities are included.

Republic of Tanzania is second and Morocco is third. The country home to the most police perpetrators is Senegal, followed by Guinea. Graphs 4 and 5 list the top ten countries per type of violation. On both lists, South Africa is ranked first, the United Republic of Tanzania second, and Morocco third. Countries rounding out the top ten in each of these three graphs (3–5) recur, although not in the same order. However, as each country contributes a different number of personnel to the mission, their order does not represent proportional significance. For example, although South Africa, the United Republic of Tanzania, and Morocco are the top three source countries of military perpetrators, they are not among the top three contributors of mission military personnel (United Nations 2022e).<sup>10</sup> When it comes to police, however, Senegal, the leading contributor of police perpetrators, is also the country that contributes the most police personnel.

MONUC/MONUSCO SEA reporting has declined since 2009. The most common SEA case is sexual exploitation. According to the statistics, South African military personnel are the most common perpetrators of both exploitation and abuse. However, it must be remembered that these statistics are from the UN database, thus they represent only cases that have a) been reported and b) been published online by the UN.

**Sexual exploitation and abuse over time**

This graph provides information on total number of allegations reported by year



Graph 1. Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Over Time.

Retrieved from <https://conduct.unmissions.org/sea-data-introduction> on 20 May 2022.

<sup>10</sup> The top three military troop contributors are Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, and the top three police contributors are Senegal, Egypt, and Jordan.

## Type of allegation

This graph provides information on the total number of allegations reported by year, separating the data by the type of allegation. Allegations that involve both sexual exploitation and sexual abuse will be reflected as 'both'.



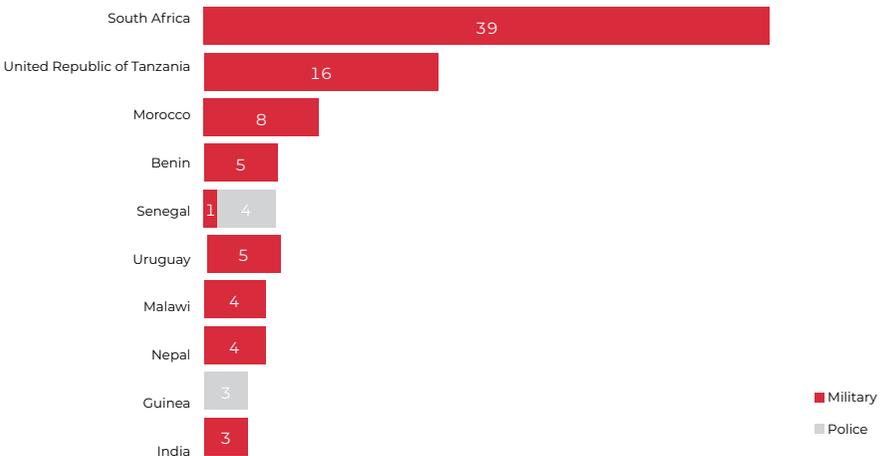
Graph 2. Type of Allegation.

Retrieved from <https://conduct.unmissions.org/sea-data-introduction> on 20 May 2022.

## Nationality of alleged perpetrators (2015 - )

This graph provides information on the nationality of informed personnel who have been implicated in allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse, separated by category of personnel. If one allegation of sexual exploitation and abuse involves uniformed personnel from more than one troop- or police contributing country, the allegation will be reflected for both countries for the purposes of this graph.

### Category of personnel



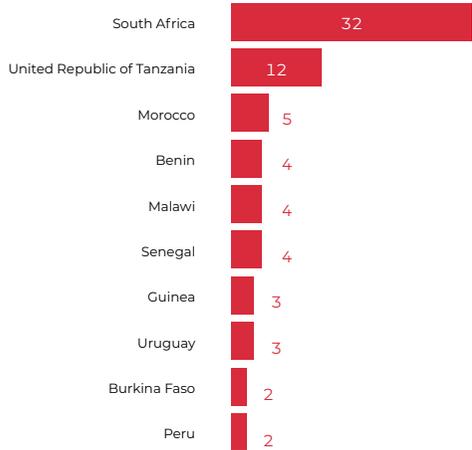
Graph 3. Nationality of Alleged Perpetrators (2015-). Category of Personnel.

Retrieved from <https://conduct.unmissions.org/sea-data-introduction> on 20 May 2022.

## Allegations of abuse



## Allegations of exploitations



Graph 4. Nationality of Alleged Perpetrators (2015–). Allegations of Abuse.

Graph 5. Nationality of Alleged Perpetrators (2015–). Allegations of Exploitation.

Retrieved from <https://conduct.unmissions.org/sea-data-introduction> on 20 May 2022.

## 4.2. Who is Most Likely Targeted by Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Why?

Now that the “main perpetrators” have been established, it is essential to determine who is most likely to be targeted by SEA and why. According to Gilliard (2011: 32), the main group of survivors is adolescent girls, and the main reasons for them being targeted are poverty, the need and desire for food and material goods, and the need to support the family. Further explanations include lack of education and negotiation power and skills, a sort of “protection” provided by UN personnel,<sup>11</sup> and the perception that having relations with them might lead to an improved status (Fraulin et al. 2021: 7, 9–10). As was established by the UN (United Nations 2022b), transactional sex/exploitation is the most common case of SEA. Consequently, many children

<sup>11</sup> However, adolescent males are more likely to believe that UN personnel would provide protection (Fraulin et al. 2021: 12).

are born of these relations, and the women and their children often do not receive aid and are abandoned by the “father” (either because he relocates or leaves the mission) (Fraulin et al. 2021: 11). Gilliard (2011: 30–31) argues that patriarchy plays a role in this problem. Girls and women have limited rights, and it is hard for a woman or girl to find paid work, which makes them “easy targets” for wealthier UN personnel who are attractive sources of income.

Evidence suggests that perpetrators engaged in exploitation believed they were not doing any harm, as they were offering food, money, or protection in exchange (Gilliard 2011: 28). In fact, there is evidence of “intermediators” who arrange women and girls for UN employees and in return receive compensation (Fraulin et al. 2021: 10–11). Many assume that those who engage in transactional sex are active participants who negotiate a price for their bodies. Although this might be true in some instances, most are affected by poor economic conditions, which make them more susceptible to using transactional sex as a survival method (Gilliard 2011: 29), thus showing a clear power imbalance between “locals” and UN personnel (Alexander & Stoddard 2021; Kanetake 2010: 202–203). One of the many issues is that some locals willingly engage in prostitution controlled by UN personnel, which nevertheless falls within the frame of exploitation. Kanetake (2010: 202) writes that the fact that this is considered exploitation and abuse hides the reality that many rely on this transactional sex as a survival mechanism. Furthermore, UN personnel have been reported to also be involved in paedophilia, rape including minors, and aided human trafficking, as there are past cases of peacekeepers buying sex slaves from villages for bread and milk (Gilliard 2011: 28, 32).

Some of the effects of SEA in the eastern DRC have been researched by Gray et al. (2021). The authors conclude that survivors experience a lowering of their social status/in their public perception in their community. They receive very little support (financial, health, employment, justice, or housing-based) from institutions (Gray et al. 2021: 5–6). They experience both public and structural stigmatization. They experience more shame than survivors of other traumatic incidents, as they are seen as partially responsible for the situation (Gray et al. 2021: 10). All of this public and structural stigma likely discourages them from coming forward and reporting their experiences (Gray et al. 2021: 11).

This section established that the group most likely targeted by SEA are adolescent girls, and the type of misconduct most often used is transactional sex/exploitation. Although some believe that engaging with UN personnel might bring personal benefits, the study by Gray et al. (2021) argues that this is not always the case.

### **4.3. United Nations (Preventive) Measures to Combat Sexual Exploitation and Abuse**

Before looking into possible future preventive measures for SEA, the current preventive measures must be introduced. This section includes an overview of the UN-based measures, which have been included in all UN organizations and adjusted to the context in which they operate. The UN has gone through two decades of SEA reforms, which have resulted in policy shifts and changes. Peacekeeping personnel are also encouraged by the Secretary-General to sign a form confirming that they understand the zero-tolerance policy. It has been made compulsory for all personnel to report any form of SEA, making it a form of “misconduct” not to do so (Rubin 2018). The UN’s zero-tolerance policy states that all sexual exploitation and abuse is prohibited and will be sanctioned (United Nations Secretariat 2003: 1–3).

One important measure is the April 2003 resolution (A/RES/57/306), which requests the Secretary-General to “take measures to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse in humanitarian and peacekeeping operations and respond rapidly when allegations come to light” (United Nations 2022a). Subsequently, the “Secretary-General’s Bulletin: Special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse” (SG/SGD/2003/13) prohibited sexual exploitation. Soon after, in 2005, the Zeid Report was issued. The Zeid Report is an extensive strategy providing a package of recommended reforms for the UN Secretariat and Member States to eliminate sexual exploitation and abuse. Following the report, Headquarters of the Conduct and Discipline Unit (CDU) was created and Conduct and Discipline Teams (CDTs) were established in field missions. Furthermore, based on the Zeid Report, the UN implemented measures (either to respond to, assist or support survivors) to combat SEA. In 2014, the Secretary-General’s report (A/69/779) proposed multiple new initiatives, including SEA prevention in personnel education

and training, new tools to enhance accountability, and better tools for providing survivor assistance. The Secretary-General's 2015 report on "Special measures for the protection from sexual exploitation and abuse" (A/70/729) put forward additional proposals and initiatives that emphasize survivor assistance, transparency, and effective partnerships with UN Member States (United Nations 2022a).

The UN kept focusing on training, as in 2016 it established a mandatory online training programme on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse. The UN now informs the host population about what kind of behaviour to expect from their personnel and how they should report any misconduct and bad behaviour. The UN has focused on encouraging the community to notice and report any misconduct. In addition, it has begun to more effectively vet personnel, who are now screened for prior misconduct. Furthermore, personnel must undergo regular risk assessment visits in the stationed area and undertake risk-mitigating actions, focusing on SEA. Peacekeeping missions have been equipped with Immediate Response Teams to gather and preserve evidence (United Nations 2022a).

Regarding survivors, in 2007, the "Comprehensive Strategy on Assistance and Support to Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by United Nations Staff and Related Personnel" was adopted, which outlines the assistance and support to those who come forward and to survivors and children born of SEA. The UN states that complainants and survivors receive support and assistance (medical care, psychological support, legal aid, food, clothing, and safe shelter) even before an investigation is completed. If a child is born of SEA, the UN will do everything to pursue paternity claims and child support. The UN is finalizing a "victim assistance protocol", which outlines "the roles and responsibilities of key actors for the effective referral, provision, and monitoring of the quality of services provided" (United Nations 2022a). Furthermore, in 2016, the Secretary-General established a "Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse", which aims to engage in community outreach to address service gaps by providing aid, support, and compensation to SEA survivors. The money for this fund is donated by UN Member States or taken out of the alleged perpetrators' payments (United Nations 2022a).

One of the most significant reforms was Resolution 2272, which the Security Council adopted in March 2016. It recognizes that sexual violence perpetrated by UN personnel has negative impacts on survivors, negatively affects the perception of the UN, and undermines UN effectiveness and moral authority (Whalan 2017: 2). This resolution gives the Secretary-General more power to repatriate and replace an entire national contingent from a mission if there is a sufficient pattern of SEA perpetrated by its members. Furthermore, Member States are given more responsibility to investigate and report allegations, hold perpetrators accountable, and inform the Secretary-General of investigative/legal progress and decisions (Whalan 2017: 8–9; United Nations 2022a).

Member States are also emerging to work on the issue, as they are “enhancing pre-deployment training, conducting effective and thorough investigations and timely reporting, holding on-site court-martial proceedings and imposing strict sanctions for perpetrators, to appointing focal points in the national legal system to facilitate paternity claims” (United Nations 2022a). Some have viewed including women in peacekeeping operations and encouraging female participation as methods to fight SEA (Rubin 2018). In reality, women are often expected to take over traditional gender roles, are discriminated against, and face sexism, racism, sexual harassment, and assault (Vermeij 2020; Donnelly et al. 2022: 1). Sexual harassment seems to be a part of the “culture” of PKOs, and the gender imbalance and high level of sexism accelerate the possibility of SEA (Donnelly et al. 2022: 13).

The previous sections have provided insight into the literature on the conceptual and contextual framework and the case study of SEA in the eastern DRC. The following sections will introduce the methodology and data analysis, followed by the results.

### 5.1. Participants and Design

This analytic-qualitative case study is based on interviews conducted in Goma, North Kivu, and Bukavu, South Kivu. It is an explorative empirical study, which presents an empirical contribution through inductive thematic content analysis. In total, 28 participants were interviewed – 16 Congolese civilians, two Congolese activists, two Congolese service providers, two Congolese NGO employees, two Congolese researchers, one former MONUSCO employee, one MONUSCO CDT representative, and two other UN representatives. The initial connection with participants was made with the help of academic and personal contacts who agreed to help by approaching their contacts in the UN, public services, and the fields of activism and journalism, and was followed by a snowball effect, resulting in additional participants. There was no specific focus on which type of UN personnel or representatives to include, as this group in general showed more hesitance in participating. Congolese service providers and researchers were specifically targeted due to their work on sexual violence and possible work with UN institutions. This did not apply to activists and other participants. However, as all participants were approached with the help of contacts, certain clusters were established. Due to this clustering and the sensitivity of the topic, voices that are not included in this study include government officials, SEA survivors, people living in extreme poverty, and UN police and military personnel.

Approaching the interviews, the authors did not follow a specific agenda other than learning from the participants' perspectives. Therefore, the

method of semi- and unstructured interviews was applied (based on Bernard 2006: 211–212). According to Bernard (2006: 213), unstructured interviews are most fitting when studying sensitive topics, which is why this technique was chosen. Through this, the aim was to shift the typical “researcher-researched” division and give the participants the chance to have some control over the conversation.

Individual and two-person interviews, as well as one target group discussion, are included in this study. The number of participants in a given interview depended on the number of representatives from an association, and the only target group discussion was conducted with a group of Congolese civilians who rotated in attendance. This method was used in order to maintain the attention of young participants while engaging in a group discussion. Before engaging in the interviews, the group sizes were communicated to all participants, and it was confirmed that everyone felt comfortable proceeding this way. With such a sensitive topic, the target group method was risky, especially as more people participated than had been anticipated.<sup>12</sup> But efforts were made to ensure all participants felt comfortable, and everyone was given the possibility of speaking in private. The target group method would normally not be recommended for the expression of more personal experiences, but in this particular setting, the participants were able to fill in each other’s gaps and rely on each other more generally.

The clusters and themes of the results were structured based on the three sub-questions, which were defined during the fieldwork. It was important to receive participants’ thoughts on the already implemented measures and, based on their thoughts, what the possible future measures should focus on. The final sub-questions emerged towards the end of the interview phase, once the shared experiences and perspectives could be seen as a whole. Furthermore, the themes that were mentioned repeatedly were given special attention and cross-referenced with the literature presented above.

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<sup>12</sup> Out of the 16 Congolese civilians interviewed, 14 participated in this method.

## 5.2. Measure and Procedure

The research was driven by an inductive approach to gather different ideas and experiences. None of the interviews were recorded and only handwritten notes were taken, which were later converted into a secure digital document. This allowed the authors to directly cluster shared comments and search for important quotations. As both authors were present in almost all the interviews, the moments after the interviews were important for sharing notes and reflecting on participants' emotions and possible body language, which amplified the words and experiences shared. Additionally, the authors used the time after the interviews to reflect on their own experience in the field and cross-reference each individual's experience with literature. It was especially important to take this time, as one of the researchers is from Goma and was able to provide context and supporting input.

The authors received all participants' consent to include the information shared and the participants were able to withdraw information within two weeks. This allowed the authors to come back to the participants for follow-up questions on clarity and direct quotations. Rough interview guides with topics and example questions were prepared before the interviews,<sup>13</sup> but as mentioned above, they were not strictly followed. The initial topics for the interview guide were based on literature, UN statistics, and current preventive measures. The study was conducted in the eastern DRC for four weeks in April 2022, and most of the time was spent in Goma, North Kivu, while Bukavu, South Kivu, was visited for two interviews. Unofficial discussions with Congolese and UN actors took place in the first week, as well as spending time with Congolese civilians at the Congo Peace Network (CPN). During this week, various participants were contacted, and interviews were scheduled, with Congolese civilians being the first interviewees, followed by activists and Congolese NGO employees. Interviews with UN representatives, Congolese activists, and researchers took place in the third and fourth weeks. The participants were approached with the help of contacts, which led to a

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<sup>13</sup> Topics included in the interview guide: life in the region, the definition of sexual violence, their field of work, UN statistics, UN preventive measures, UN presence in the region, and how to prevent SEA.

snowball effect that resulted in additional interviewees. The interviews with UN personnel were in English, while the interviews with Congolese, NGO employees, activists, service providers, and researchers were conducted in French and/or Swahili.

### **5.3. Ethical Considerations**

Ethics play a highly significant role in such a sensitive topic. The authors have different backgrounds which add a balanced perspective to the analysis. As already touched upon, one of the authors is from Goma and was an important presence, instilling trust with Congolese participants. Additionally, before the fieldwork, both authors reflected on past experiences and what it might mean for the study to have a European author present in the field. This was further considered during the whole of the fieldwork, as well as when putting together the analysis. With all the interviews, the authors focused on giving more power to the participants and letting them guide the conversations on the topic in a direction they best saw fit. Although the final analysis was done by the authors, special attention was given to noting the sensations and body language the participants revealed during the conversations.

Additionally, sexual violence is in itself a highly sensitive topic, and people of the eastern DRC are particularly sensitive to it, as it has been overly researched and analysed, as they themselves expressed to us. Therefore, taking a step back during the interviews and giving the participants room to guide the research was a priority, especially after sensing hesitancy at the beginning of the search for participants. People seemed more open to participating once the study and the focus were explained, and the fact that the study takes a general rather than personal approach instilled trust. Interview participants gave their consent to include the information shared.

The data analysis is based on the results of the fieldwork and is divided into three sub-questions: What are Congolese general perceptions of the United Nations and sexual violence? Which current UN measures have been rated successful? How can sexual exploitation and abuse be prevented?

## **6.1. What are Congolese General Perceptions of the United Nations and Sexual Violence?**

As the DRC is often portrayed as the “rape capital of the world” (Lewis 2021) and most SEA reports come from the DRC (United Nations 2022b), speaking about sexual violence in the DRC is relatively complex. As the literature review suggests, the eastern DRC context in particular has a history of insecurity, which has led to the normalization of many types of violence, including sexual violence. Congolese participants pointed this out during (un)official conversations, and it was portrayed as an essential factor in understanding SEA in the region. It was also emphasized that experiencing (sexual) family violence or other harassment tends to be a shared experience. Family violence came up in all the interviews with Congolese participants, with extended male family members (cousins, uncles) often being the main perpetrators. Participants stated that this mostly happens to children, and children often do not come forward.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, children tend to be easier to manipulate and are less often believed when and if they speak up.<sup>15</sup> Moreover,

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with a Congolese participant, Goma, 12 April 2022; interview with a Congolese participant, Goma, 12 April 2022; interview with two Congolese activists, Goma, 15 April 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with a Congolese participant, Goma, 12 April 2022.

a Congolese researcher concluded that women in the region experience different types of violence, ranging from sexual, physical, psychological, and economic violence to forced marriages and domestic and family violence.<sup>16</sup> There is a cultural shame that women and girls experience if they end up pregnant out of wedlock, leading to them often being banished from their families.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, to avoid community and family rejection and shame, they might end up undergoing unsafe abortions, which might put their lives in danger.<sup>18</sup> Including these insights is essential, as participants concluded that growing up in such surroundings impacts one's perception of the issue of sexual violence, one's position in society, and how sensitized one is towards sexual violence.<sup>19</sup> Although the researchers' data is mainly on women and girls, these issues also impact other identities and genders.

Furthermore, most participants have spent either all, most, or a big chunk of their lives in the UN PKO's presence. UN employees are presented and seen as "peacemakers", but one participant pointed out that many end up taking advantage of their power by using mainly women and girls for sexual acts.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, (female) participants mentioned that they and their friends were personally harassed by MONUC/MONUSCO personnel when they were younger. They were offered candy, apples, juice, and biscuits, often followed by verbal harassment (for instance sexual comments). The participants spoke openly about this reoccurring childhood memory.<sup>21</sup> One of the participants' friends even started dating a MONUC employee, and the friend then received candy, juice, apples, and biscuits more often.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, a (male) Congolese participant shared a story of a woman he knows, who is a survivor of SEA, and who ended up pregnant from the abuse. She was a cleaner and worked at the perpetrator's home. After the incident,

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<sup>16</sup> Domestic violence is within a marriage, whereas family violence goes beyond this.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with a Congolese researcher, Goma, 19 April 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with a Congolese participant, Goma, 12 April 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with a Congolese participant, Goma, 12 April 2022; target group discussion with a group of Congolese participants, Goma, 14 April 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with a Congolese participant, Goma, 12 April 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with a Congolese participant, Goma, 12 April 2022;  
interview with a Congolese participant, Goma, 12 April 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with a Congolese participant, Goma, 12 April 2022.

she was scared to speak up, as she feared losing her job as a consequence of filing a complaint. In the end, the perpetrator left and abandoned the woman with the child.<sup>23</sup> Those who help in personnel homes (for example cleaners) are often SEA targets. It is hard to find a job in the eastern DRC, which is why many fear speaking up, as there is a chance they might lose their job.<sup>24</sup>

Although this disrespect seems common, it was also mentioned that many (mainly girls) want to have a relationship with UN/MONUSCO personnel since they have money and can provide for them.<sup>25</sup> One Congolese participant, remembering childhood, said that mixed children were privileged, desired, and seen as more beautiful. Thus many girls dreamed, and some girls still dream, of marrying a White man and having lighter-skinned children.<sup>26, 27</sup> Another Congolese participant shared stories from Bukavu, where women were proud of sleeping with White men. Although these stories are not from recent years, the participant added that this is a general idea of how many still view the UN.<sup>28</sup> Some families living in poor circumstances, especially those in villages, encourage their daughters to have any relationship with UN personnel, as long as they provide food or an improvement in the family's financial situation.<sup>29</sup>

This section highlighted the simultaneous experience of family-based sexual violence and the continuation of exploitation, abuse, and disrespect by UN and MONUSCO personnel. Both these phenomena are significant for the main research question, as these two topics were often referred to when speaking about how SEA has over time become normalized.

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<sup>23</sup> Target group discussion with a group of Congolese participants, Goma, 14 April 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with a Congolese activist and an NGO employee, Goma, 15 April 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with a Congolese participant, Goma, 12 April 2022.

<sup>26</sup> In general, when the participants referred to "White", they included people with brown skin tones.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with a Congolese participant, Goma, 12 April 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Target group discussion with a group of Congolese participants, Goma, 14 April 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with a Congolese researcher and journalist, Goma, 28 April 2022.

## 6.2. Which Current UN Measures Have Been Rated Successful?

This sub-section includes reflections on which preventive measures have been rated successful and some of the expressed challenges. Importantly, it was noted that SEA is hardly spoken about, so it is difficult to address the issue adequately or assess it.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the topic of SEA is multilayered, without a “one size fits all” cluster for survivors.

The measure most praised by UN representatives and partners was improved training. They mentioned that all personnel receive mandatory SEA training before and after entering the job and retraining every three months.<sup>31</sup> This training helps remind them of the issue and their duty to the people.<sup>32</sup> One UN institution introduced a new workshop initiative, for which they invite all partners, SEA experts, the focal points/outreach centres, and other UN agencies to discuss and pinpoint current SEA problems in order to formulate priorities. These priorities will then be worked on and must be considered in the upcoming activities. Although training and workshops are important, a UN representative highlighted that training needs to continue and will not solve the problem alone; other successful initiatives need to be put in place.<sup>33</sup>

A further successful initiative mentioned by service providers and the UN is improved complaint mechanisms. Now, there are different ways for people to come forward: depositing a complaint into a complaint box,<sup>34</sup> via a hotline, speaking to their community-chosen representative, submitting an online report, writing an email, or making a direct complaint.<sup>35</sup> Any person can file a complaint with the partner NGO or UN institution in question, and this data is processed confidentially and forwarded, if necessary.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with a UN representative, Goma, 18 April 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with a UN representative, Goma, 18 April 2022; interview with a CDT spokesperson for military personnel MONUSCO, Bukavu, 22 April 2022; interview with a UN representative, Bukavu, 23 April 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with a CDT spokesperson for military personnel MONUSCO, Bukavu, 22 April 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with a UN representative, Goma, 18 April 2022.

<sup>34</sup> A complaint box can be found at the entrance of UN and partner buildings.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with a UN representative, Bukavu, 23 April 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with a UN representative, Goma, 18 April 2022; interview with a UN representative, Bukavu, 23 April 2022.

A third measure praised by the UN and partners is the improved community-based approach. The updated approach was implemented in late 2020, and since then, communication between the institutions and the communities has improved. One UN institution noted that they have since received more direct complaints (not only regarding SEA) from the community, which is seen as a sign of success.<sup>37</sup> With this approach, the communities choose their representative, who facilitates interactions between the community, the UN, and other organizations. The benefit of choosing these representatives is that they are trusted within the communities and can identify problems better than the organizations can.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, a Congolese service-providing institution is working with community churches to build awareness about sexual violence and other topics.<sup>39</sup> Enhancing cooperation with the community was emphasized as a crucial mechanism, especially in finding new ways to communicate and share information.<sup>40</sup> MONUSCO also has focal points/outreach centres in each city that work on sensitization within the communities and provide free-time activities that attract Congolese to learn about the operation and its values.<sup>41</sup>

Additionally, cooperation between NGOs and UN institutions was mentioned as a successful approach. The representatives of a service-providing institution spoke about the holistic approach with UN agencies, Congolese and independent NGOs, and other actors, which together work on preventing SEA.<sup>42</sup> Some further successful measures were mentioned by a CDT spokesperson for military personnel at MONUSCO in Bukavu. MONUSCO uses risk assessment personnel who check the locations of a possible compound/camp for any potential risks, and this report is then taken into consideration in the final decision. Additionally, MONUSCO personnel have a curfew between 6 PM and 6 AM, and only other UN personnel are allowed to visit the compound. The personnel also receive an out-of-bound list with locations they are not allowed to visit due to various risks. An important measure has

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<sup>37</sup> Interview with a UN representative, Goma, 18 April 2022.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with a UN representative, Goma, 18 April 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with two Congolese service providers, Goma, 19 April 2022.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with a UN representative, Goma, 18 April 2022; interview with two Congolese service providers, Goma, 19 April 2022.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with a CDT spokesperson for military personnel MONUSCO, Bukavu, 22 April 2022.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with two Congolese service providers, Goma, 19 April 2022.

also been for personnel to realize the effects of getting involved in SEA, as even people who are aware of possible misconduct and do not report it will be punished. Realistically, the representative highlighted that they cannot rule out the possibility of SEA, but they can constantly monitor, train, reduce the cases, police out-of-bound regions, and punish the perpetrators.<sup>43</sup>

Although some praised the previous measures, challenges were also recognized. For example, the hotline has been criticized, as the call is directed to Kinshasa, which may present a language barrier, and takes more time than the other methods of reporting.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, a former MONUSCO employee spoke about how the general working environment is very hostile and macho male-dominated. The participant shared similar insights as brought forward in the report by Donnelly et al. (2022), stating that women are being mistreated, harassed, and abused, and many men do not see them as capable enough to be doing their job.<sup>45</sup> A UN representative mentioned a further challenge. Due to the cooperation of multiple entities, many parties are involved in the activities. It was expressed that each partner must implement protection from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse in their agenda,<sup>46</sup> but in reality, it is hard to monitor what each partner does in their field.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, throughout the interviews, the importance of justice and consequential punishment was often brought up. These have been important to the UN as well, but one activist and one NGO member reported their experiences working with people abused by UN personnel: perpetrators were either not jailed or received a minimal sentence.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, the UN Trust Fund for Victims is seen as a promising idea, but it is problematic to implement due to the lack of funding.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, one UN organization would like to be able to provide long-term assistance and assist in other needs that are not directly triggered by SEA.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Interview with a CDT spokesperson for military personnel MONUSCO, Bukavu, 22 April 2022.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with a Congolese participant, Goma, 12 April 2022.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with a former MONUSCO employee, Goma, 27 April 2022.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with a UN representative, Goma, 18 April 2022; interview with a UN representative, Bukavu, 23 April 2022.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with a UN representative, Goma, 18 April 2022.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with a Congolese activist and an NGO employee, Goma, 15 April 2022.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with a Congolese activist and an NGO employee, Goma, 15 April 2022; interview with a UN representative, Bukavu, 23 April 2022.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with a UN representative, Bukavu, 23 April 2022.

Two Congolese researchers, interviewed separately, talked about the fact that nowadays, perpetrators are more careful, but that SEA is still very much happening.<sup>51</sup> SEA has become normalized and tolerated, so many do not see this as a violation and consequently would not report it. There are many cases, but only the major ones are reported and spoken about because they shock people.<sup>52</sup> This argumentation is important to keep in mind when looking at the statistics presented in the literature review and speaking about SEA. Additionally, many try to hide the reality.<sup>53</sup> Even today, there are still “brothels” the personnel would go to, which are broadly known. Furthermore, reporting is a very sensitive issue, as people do not report SEA or other violations when their main priority is to survive.<sup>54</sup> One Congolese researcher is critical of the success of the community-based approach:

Many are poor, especially in the villages. Do you think they will report? It is hard for them to speak up; they need the money. The UN personnel who distribute food, water, and so on in villages are called ‘bosses’. If you see your daughter speaking to a ‘boss’, you will be proud, and you will not report this.<sup>55</sup>

To sum up, the three most popular measures have been training, improved complaint mechanisms, and an enhanced community-based approach. Although these and other measures were praised, challenges were also identified on opposing sides. Connecting this sub-section to the literature on previous UN measures makes it clear that most have not been successful and fail to target the core issue. Therefore, it is clear the participants see room for improvement in preventing SEA.

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<sup>51</sup> Interview with a Congolese researcher, Goma, 27 April 2022; interview with a Congolese researcher and journalist, Goma, 28 April 2022.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with a Congolese researcher, Goma, 27 April 2022.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with a Congolese researcher, Goma, 27 April 2022.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with a Congolese researcher and journalist, Goma, 28 April 2022.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with a Congolese researcher, Goma, 27 April 2022.

### 6.3. How Can Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Be Prevented?

The most essential (sub-)question is how to prevent SEA. Throughout the interviews, participants shared various recommendations that can be clustered together and divided along thematic lines under four different themes: justice, structural change, education, and the international dimension.

Firstly, future preventive measures need to focus on clear justice and consequences.<sup>56</sup> As listed in the literature review, there are already existing legal measures, such as the risk assessment and the zero-tolerance policy, but these need to be followed more strictly and implemented more rigorously at the regional level.<sup>57</sup> According to participants, special focus should be placed on investigation and assisting survivors,<sup>58</sup> as well as providing hard proof that the T/PCCs have punished the perpetrators.<sup>59</sup> At the moment the affected people do not have access to information that justice has been served, as the trial and persecution mainly take place abroad. One way to change this would be to punish the perpetrators in the DRC (at least until their mandate is finished).<sup>60</sup> In fact, the wish was expressed to have the DRC more involved and be given more agency in the investigation and sentencing process.<sup>61</sup>

Secondly, political/institutional change was raised as a crucial aspect to prevent SEA. Within this category, participants pointed out the need to protect and support survivors and vulnerable groups by providing jobs and uplifting people from poverty.<sup>62</sup> One participant mentioned the need for a strong government that protects the rights of others and governance that protects the project against violations.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, both women and men

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<sup>56</sup> Interview with a Congolese researcher, Goma, 19 April 2022.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with a CDT spokesperson for military personnel MONUSCO, Bukavu, 22 April 2022; interview with a UN representative, Bukavu, 23 April 2022.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with a Congolese participant, Goma, 12 April 2022.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with two Congolese activists, Goma, 15 April 2022.

<sup>60</sup> Target group discussion with a group of Congolese participants, Goma, 14 April 2022; interview with a Congolese activist and an NGO employee, Goma, 15 April 2022.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with a Congolese participant, Goma, 12 April 2022; interview with a Congolese activist and an NGO employee, Goma, 15 April 2022.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with a Congolese participant, Goma, 12 April 2022; interview with a Congolese researcher, Goma, 27 April 2022; interview with two Congolese service providers, Goma, 19 April 2022.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with a Congolese researcher and journalist, Goma, 28 April 2022.

who work on and educate on gender issues should be appointed to high-level positions within these political institutions.<sup>64</sup> The suggestions presented support the already existing literature on who is most likely targeted by SEA and why (Gilliard 2011; Fraulin et al. 2021), as elaborated in the literature review. Future preventive measures, therefore, need to clearly target this.

Thirdly, possible preventive measures need to focus on education. Education needs to be made more available and used to sensitize sexual violence and SEA, as well as normalize sex (and similar) work.<sup>65</sup> Education on sex, sexual needs, and consent needs to especially target boys,<sup>66</sup> who need to be proactively incorporated into discussions on gender, sex, and sexual relations.<sup>67</sup> Recommendations in this cluster fit the political/institutional changes above and are supported by literature (Freedman 2011; Fraulin et al. 2021). Education was seen as a crucial point in empowering vulnerable groups and lifting people out of poverty. Additionally, education on these issues plays a crucial role in closing the loopholes of sexual violence and sensitizing the public on the topic, which makes it more likely for people to speak out against sexual violations.

Fourthly, international actors and cooperation need to be targeted and, most importantly, SEA needs to be seen as a global issue, not a “DRC issue”.<sup>68</sup> The UN needs to become a vital institution whose actions have clear consequences,<sup>69</sup> building on the recommendations on the topic of justice, as mentioned above. Additionally, the psychological impact of being a humanitarian worker in the field, as well as international personnel needs, must be addressed,<sup>70</sup> which was pointed out by Donnelly et al. (2022). Furthermore, there is currently a clear gap between international and national actors, as international actors often perceive themselves as “outside” Congolese communities, which increases the chance of misconduct. Instead, international actors should play their part in community building,<sup>71</sup> and incorporate Congolese communities

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<sup>64</sup> Interview with a former MONUSCO employee, Goma, 27 April 2022.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with a Congolese researcher, Goma, 27 April 2022; interview with two Congolese service providers, Goma, 19 April 2022; interview with a Congolese participant, Goma, 12 April 2022.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with a Congolese participant, Goma, 12 April 2022.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with a Congolese participant, Goma, 12 April 2022.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with a UN representative, Goma, 18 April 2022.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with a UN representative, Goma, 18 April 2022.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with two Congolese service providers, Goma, 19 April 2022.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with a Congolese participant, Goma, 12 April 2022.

into the UN strategy on preventing SEA.<sup>72</sup> Additionally, UN and MONUSCO personnel should not have more rights than Congolese state employees have, nor should they be able to operate on Congolese territory with impunity from prosecution for any crimes committed while deployed.<sup>73</sup>

Although the participants offered different perspectives, there are some overlapping themes: consequential justice, empowerment, education, a more robust Congolese government and UN institution, more agency, focus on Congolese communities, and changing the general understanding of sexual violence and sex/gender. All these preventive measures have different target groups but together are seen as small contributions to fighting SEA. Some of these suggestions build on already existing UN measures, whereas others put forward a new approach to combatting SEA, such as focusing on internal misconduct within the UN and giving more agency to the DRC government.

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<sup>72</sup> Interview with a UN representative, Goma, 18 April 2022.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with a Congolese participant, Goma, 12 April 2022.

As highlighted in the literature review, SEA targets are not only the host population but also UN personnel. This was confirmed by interviews with a former MONUSCO employee, who emphasized the macho masculine culture within the UN. Moreover, Congolese participants, including civilians, activists, and researchers, indicated that there is a lack of respect from the UN for the Congolese population. Many expressed distress about the UN abusing its power and the Congolese population, leaving many of them exposed to harm. On the UN side, concerns were raised about the lack of (psychological and other) support for UN personnel, which leads many to misconduct. Furthermore, linking the conceptual framework to the regional context, what the Congolese participants define as “sexual violence” includes domestic and family violence, as well as SEA. Consequently, to effectively combat SEA, any preventive measures must address the broader issues of gender, sex, and sexual violence.

Interview insights spurred ideas for potential recommendations to prevent SEA. Many recommendations offer fresh perspectives, such as re-evaluating the UN’s structure and establishing stronger governance within the DRC. These recommendations go beyond merely improving personnel training. It became apparent that the UN must address more than misconduct toward the host population, as emphasized by Donnelly et al. (2022). The UN must transform its toxic masculine environment and eradicate misogyny within its organization. In fact, the focus on SEA has continuously been on the host population and insufficient attention has been given to the UN’s internal challenges (Donnelly et al. 2022: 14). Therefore, besides combating SEA on

the “outside”, special attention needs to be paid to preventing SEA on the “inside” and implementing sustainable internal policies. Additionally, the way deployment is viewed by the UN needs to change. There is a clear need for psychological and other support for international personnel, which has not been given the attention it deserves. This aligns with Donnelly et al.’s (2022) study, making it clear that there are gaps within the UN and deployment that must be addressed.

However, according to Congolese interviewees, the UN is not the only one that must act, as they also see their government as responsible for ensuring the security of the people of the region. The participants addressed a clear desire to have the Congolese government involved in the persecution and trials of accused perpetrators. When these are put on trial outside the DRC, it more often results in acquittal, meaning that the affected people do not receive the justice they deserve. Moving the trial and persecution at least in part to the eastern DRC would allow for more transparency and agency. Additionally, frustration was expressed about why the government was not protecting its citizens or assisting them by providing employment opportunities and necessary resources (such as income, social or adequate legal services). The sections above show that some of the reasons people engage in or are targeted by SEA are the lack of resources, economic opportunities, and basic needs. Additionally, because of SEA, survivors might end up facing long-lasting consequences such as unwanted pregnancies and psychological difficulties, many of which could be prevented by government investments. In line with this, it was mentioned that vulnerable groups should receive targeted support to reduce their vulnerability. This can be achieved by providing jobs with fair wages, which consequently would decrease the power relation affecting those who have them, as well as give more agency to Congolese groups and decrease the chance of vulnerable people being targeted by SEA. When equality is promoted within societies, vulnerable groups are empowered and increased economic opportunities for these groups reduce their dependency on others.

The continuation of violence presented in the literature as well as mentioned by participants has created a certain numbness towards sexual violence. Consequently, when SEA occurs, it often fails to receive the attention it

deserves. As mentioned by the interviewees, sexual violence no longer shocks, and is instead taken as a norm. This is magnified by the various definitions of sexual violence which open a grey area for misconduct. The literature already shows that a unified definition of sexual violence is lacking, and its being a taboo topic in the eastern DRC makes it even harder to define. This shows the need for educational reform, which must be targeted within the communities. Participants spoke about educating young boys on various topics, including sexual violence, consent, gender, and sex. This would on the one hand break down the numbness and make obvious the need to speak out against it, and, on the other hand, build clear barriers against its occurrence. New programmes have been implemented to open discussions about gender-based violence (GBV), but these discussions, as well as educational activities, should occur in schools, especially while the students are still young. Such changes in education would help people, not least young boys, to better understand gender equality and raise awareness of SEA as a larger issue in the community while fighting gender stereotypes. However, these resources need to be accessible to everyone, especially vulnerable communities.

In addition to targeting protection from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, this study touched on the colonial implication of sexual violence. There is a clear power dynamic between international UN employees, who seem to benefit from a certain privileged status, and Congolese – a dynamic comparable to that of the “colonizer” vis-à-vis the “colonized”, as put forward by Stoler (2010). UN officials are set apart from citizens, have the status of foreigners, immunity from prosecution, and a more stable and higher income, and carry an implicit threat of violence over the citizens they are supposed to protect. Additionally, the label of the “rape capital of the world” (Lewis 2021) is based on sexual violence allegations arising from internal conflicts and has been given to the country by actors from the Global North. However, these same actors fail to address SEA, and the voices of those within the DRC addressing the violations against their people are going unnoticed. This leaves an impression that how we speak of sexual violence, how we treat survivors of sexual violence, and how we address these disputes in the international context are based on these unequal power dynamics.

This study has certain limitations, which are related to the topic's complexity. The participants do not represent the whole spectrum of perspectives that should be included. Some crucial groups not included are survivors of SEA, governmental officials, people living in extreme poverty, and UN police and military personnel. As implied in the methods, the participant pool concentrated mainly on different Congolese actors. This is because there were specific difficulties and risks in accessing other groups, such as survivors or perpetrators of SEA. The authors advocate incorporating affected voices into future preventive measures, which is why future studies should aim at learning from the experiences and needs of those affected. Furthermore, the data analysis was mainly conducted in Goma, meaning that the shared ideas were restricted to this geographical area. Further studies should include a broader geographical context and speak to a broader range of actors.

This study analysed the issue of SEA in the context of the eastern DRC, including Goma and Bukavu, with the aim of identifying effective preventive measures. Additionally, the authors touched on the complexity of defining sexual violence, which is incorporated into the analysis of future preventive measures. As shown in the conceptual framework and touched upon in the data analysis, there is no clear understanding of the term “sexual violence” and the historical structures that revolve around it, especially the colonial significance. Therefore, addressing colonial longevity and incorporating decolonization of sexual violence in any preventive policy is a must.

Regarding future preventive measures, the data analysis shows that the participants have overlapping perspectives. The concrete recommendations that are listed below can be divided into the following themes: justice, structural change, education, and the international dimension. These measures can be implemented through partnerships with national governments and communities, as well as international organizations by strengthening the legal framework and finding synergies. It is important to highlight that implementing these recommendations would require significant investment and commitment from all stakeholders, both at the national and international levels. Furthermore, moving forward requires addressing previous inequalities and injustice, which is why combating SEA comes with taking responsibility and addressing historical injustices as well.

Summarizing the participants’ recommendations, the following policy recommendations emerge. Firstly, future UN preventive measures must

address the SEA taking place internally and put in place educational and monitoring measures as well as provide support systems for their personnel regarding discrimination, violence, and psychological distress. Secondly, future policies need to emphasize education and sensitization on sexual violence. Including more courses, workshops, and discussions on this topic would raise awareness building. Additionally, making sure that vulnerable groups have access to this knowledge and receive not only theoretical but actual support and protection is a must. Thirdly, transforming the way perpetrators are prosecuted and how justice is served needs to be addressed. The UN and the DRC government should strengthen their cooperation in prosecuting perpetrators (for example by punishing the perpetrators in the DRC) and bringing justice to survivors and their families. In general, the process of prosecution and justice needs to happen locally where the incident occurred, as the affected participants otherwise have limited access to information on the outcomes. Fourthly, vulnerable groups need to be supported to combat poverty, and the inequality between a UN employee and a civilian needs to be narrowed. As the literature and data analysis show, a major component of SEA is the vulnerable standing and survival difficulties of the affected people. The national government needs to put in place policies and funding that provide a secure standing for its citizens and the UN needs to promote this. Lastly, the UN needs to empower community building and focus on giving back to the host population and communities. There is a clear separation between the UN and the broader group of civilians. Providing systems through which international personnel gives back to the community can help build trust and understanding between these groups.

As addressed in previous sections, this study has its limitations. The group of interviewees lacks diversity, as SEA survivors, government officials, people living in extreme poverty, and even UN police or military troops are not adequately reflected in the study. Additionally, the study is geographically limited to the eastern DRC, and the suggestions that were voiced there might not be fitting for another geographical context. Therefore, in implementing policies, the context of the affected region needs to be considered and their specific requirements addressed. Furthermore, the lack of unanimity on the definition of sexual violence is problematic. Even the most fitting preventive measures will have loopholes if all affected parties work with their respective

definitions. This leads to dangerous grey areas that might be perceived as sexual violence by some and as normal behaviour by others. Within the literature, the colonial legacies need to be taken into consideration when developing a definition and a general understanding of sexual violence.

In conclusion, combating SEA requires future preventive measures to target various levels, including national and international, while addressing existing loopholes (such as internal UN preventive measures, funding, community building, and improved support systems). The data analysis highlights the progress made by the UN in combating SEA through measures such as enhanced training, complaint mechanisms, community-based approaches, and risk assessments. Therefore, it must be emphasized that the UN's dedication to combating SEA has been expansive, but as the conclusion shows, the next steps need to be broader and less conventional.

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Individual Interview 1: Interview with a Congolese participant, Goma, 12 April 2022.

Individual Interview 2: Interview with a Congolese participant, Goma, 12 April 2022.

Individual Interview 3: Interview with a Congolese activist and an NGO employee, Goma, 15 April 2022.

Individual Interview 4: Interview with a UN representative, Goma, 18 April 2022.

Individual Interview 5: Interview with a Congolese researcher, Goma, 19 April 2022.

Individual Interview 6: Interview with a CDT spokesperson for military personnel MONUSCO, Bukavu, 22 April 2022.

Individual Interview 7: Interview with a UN representative, Bukavu, 23 April 2022.

Individual Interview 8: Interview with a Congolese researcher, Goma, 27 April 2022.

Individual Interview 9: Interview with a former MONUSCO employee, Goma, 27 April 2022.

Individual Interview 10: Interview with a Congolese researcher and journalist, Goma, 28 April 2022.

Partner Interview 1: Interview with two Congolese activists, Goma, 15 April 2022.

Partner Interview 2: Interview with two Congolese service providers, Goma, 19 April 2022.

Target Group Discussion: Target group discussion with a group of Congolese participants, Goma, 14 April 2022.

## The Insecure Livelihoods Series

