

# 'Those MONUSCO agents left while we were still pregnant': Accountability and support for peacekeeper-fathered children in the DRC

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## Abstract

The Democratic Republic of Congo hosts the longest-running and largest United Nations peacekeeping mission in history. The United Nations also has reckoned with sexual exploitation and abuse in its own ranks and, in 2003, recognized its importance with a Bulletin which became known as the 'zero tolerance policy'. Policymakers and researchers have paid little sustained attention, however, to children fathered by peacekeepers. In this article, we share the results of our mixed-methods SenseMaker<sup>®</sup> research with community members who interact with peacekeeping personnel and interviews with 58 women who are raising children fathered by peacekeepers. Despite the United Nations policies in place, most women did not report children fathered by peacekeepers and did not receive systematic support. The analysis reveals a large gap between the aspirations of the 'zero tolerance policy' and its operationalization in the Democratic Republic of Congo. We uncovered deep poverty and insecurity as both driving and resulting from women's sexual encounters with peacekeepers, with support needs largely unmet. We argue that there is a lack of enforcement of the United Nations policies, jurisdictional complexity and inaccessible justice, as well as significant gaps between the United Nations' approach to investigating and supporting children fathered by peacekeepers and the expectations of mothers, resulting in worsened life conditions for mothers and their children.

## Keywords

access to justice, child support, DR Congo, gender violence

## Introduction

The problem of 'sexual exploitation and abuse' by United Nations (UN) peacekeepers was first recognized in 1993 during the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia mission (UNTAC). Despite reports of rape, organized sex trafficking and abuse of minors, the head of mission maintained that 'boys will be boys' and the problem was unworthy of systematic attention or redress (Westendorf, 2020). This sentiment was echoed in later statements by prominent UN figures and was demonstrated through lack of investigation and support to victims throughout the 1990s. It was not until 2000 that sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) began to garner

serious attention, with the first official UN policy released in 2003. The 2003 Bulletin recognized the extent of SEA and outlined the parameters of what constituted abusive and exploitative sexual contact. This policy defined SEA as,

any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another. Similarly, the term 'sexual abuse' means the

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actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions. (ST/SGB/2003/13)

In 2017, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres renewed the UN's commitment to combating SEA and updated prevention approaches. These new contributions included establishment of the Offices of the Special Representative and Special Advisor on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, and the Circle of Leadership on the prevention of and response to SEA in United Nations operations; the expansion of Community-Based Complaint Networks which engage civil society organizations to prevent and collect reports of SEA, removing the requirement of reporting directly to UN personnel; and the expansion of the Trust Fund for Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (hereafter the Trust Fund) tasked with providing medical, psycho-social and vocational support to victims and educational support to their children (UNSG, 2017). What these and subsequent policies and bulletins do not sufficiently appreciate is the large number of children born as a result of sexual interactions between local women and UN personnel, the unmet needs of these children and their mothers, or the impact this has on families and communities. Our research explores the barriers to support for children fathered by peacekeepers (PKFC) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

While there were reportedly prior attempts to draw attention to the problem of SEA in the DRC, allegations were first formally investigated in 2004. Over the past 15 years, the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC)/the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) has consistently held the dubious title of one of the worst missions for SEA. While formal reports decreased in 2018/2019 in the DRC and elsewhere, it is clear from our empirical research, as well as the UN's own admission, that the number of official allegations do not capture the full extent of SEA in any peacekeeping mission. In addition to limitations in reporting mechanisms, investigation and follow-through, the context of insecurity, widespread poverty and displacement in the DRC makes responding to allegations extremely challenging.

In this article we focus on the lives of women raising PKFC. These children were born as a result of consensual, transactional, or violent encounters;<sup>1</sup> almost all require and

many are legally entitled to ongoing support for their basic needs,<sup>2</sup> yet support has not been forthcoming or accessible for numerous reasons that we explore herein. Our primary research question sought to answer why there are persistent barriers to support and justice for women and their PKFC. Through this exploration, we uncovered three main findings: peacekeeper knowledge of the pregnancy/child; challenges to reporting; and high support needs. Our analysis uncovered that, rather than peacekeepers being unaware of the existence of the child, or women not understanding how to report, there were logistical, institutional and legal barriers to accessing much-needed support for PKFC.

This article contributes to the literature by emphasizing the first-person perspectives and experiences of women raising PKFC. In this, we draw on important work in the fields of feminist security studies, gender and political economies of peacekeeping (Westendorf, 2020; McEvoy-Levy 2007; Henry, 2019; Jennings, 2014), with their insights on the impact of structural violence, patriarchal relations and poverty on exploitative sexual relations between peacekeepers and local women. We argue that this violence reverberates into the lives of children born of these encounters, aggravated by a lack of recognition from the UN, and producing important barriers to accessing support. Our qualitative interviews with 58 mothers show that very few women raising PKFC reported to the relevant MONUSCO office or base despite general knowledge among host community members that peacekeepers are not supposed to engage in sexual relations with local women. Further, while almost all of the UN personnel knew that the woman was pregnant, they did not honour their promise to support the child. Broader community research uncovered the belief that MONUSCO is best positioned to support women and girls following SEA and that poverty is both a key driver and effect of exploitative relationships. We argue there are serious gaps between UN approaches to SEA in design and practice that go beyond technical issues of implementation. Rather, the operationalization of the policy and required means of accessing support are incongruent with the lived realities of community members in conflict-affected post-colonial states.

<sup>1</sup> We use the term consensual when women described the encounter as a 'love relationship' while acknowledging the conditions of structural inequality and exploitation in which the relations take place.

<sup>2</sup> Paragraph 8 of A/RES/62/214 (2008) reads: 'Children born as a result of sexual exploitation and abuse should receive, in accordance with their individual needs, assistance and support addressing the medical, legal, psychological and social consequences directly arising from sexual exploitation and abuse, in the best interests of the child. The United Nations should also work with Member States to facilitate, within their competence, the pursuit of claims related to paternity and child support.'

Despite recognition of the needs and rights of PKFC within UN General Assembly Resolution 62/214 (Para 8, 2008), the women interviewed in our research have struggled to access support.

In the first section, we briefly review the history and content of UN policies on sexual exploitation and abuse in peacekeeping missions. Here we note the complexities of the legal scaffolding on the topic of SEA in general, and PKFC in particular. Our primary research question was grounded in exploring, from a gender-sensitive and survivor-centered perspective, the barriers to legal support for PKFC. In the next section, we discuss these challenges for implementation, before positioning the current research within the context of contemporary DRC and the implications of this research for humanitarian efforts, conflict and peace studies. We then explain our research methods in detail, including discussion of our research partnership, before turning to the key findings in the research study. Our discussion section focuses on the legal scaffolding surrounding PKFC and their mothers, drawing out barriers and opportunities for a survivor-centered and child rights approach to be better employed.

### **Sexual exploitation and abuse in UN peacekeeping: A brief overview of UN policy**

The UN maintains a zero tolerance policy (ZTP) on sexual exploitation and abuse. No sexual contact or relationship is permitted if: a minor is involved (under age 18 regardless of age of majority/consent in host state), the sexual contact involves physical, economic, or political coercion, or is transactional in nature, including soliciting transactional sex or benefitting monetarily from another person's sexual activity (UNSG Special Bulletin 13, 2003; Deschamps et al., 2015). Here we can see the conflation of sexual violence and transactional sex (Otto, 2007). Indeed, throughout the policy there is little distinction between sex that may be characterized as exploitative but consensual, and rape, sexual assault or abuse of children. Many missions, including MONUSCO, include non-fraternization policies for military and police personnel, positioning all sexual relationships as misconduct and subject to disciplinary action.<sup>3</sup>

According to the ZTP, allegations of misconduct are actionable when made by the victim, by a witness, or through a community-based complaint mechanism and if reported directly to mission staff, through an NGO, or to the media. The UN is then mandated to immediately provide support to the victim consisting of medical care and psychosocial support, as well as legal support in cases where the allegation includes a paternity claim. Child support claims can only be processed through the member state, not the host state or the UN. Therefore, a Congolese woman who becomes pregnant with the child of a peacekeeper must levy her support claims through the home justice system of the peacekeeper. There is rarely financial support available for her to travel to the peacekeeper's country, however. While legal support is made available in DRC, the challenges in pursuing a child support claim in another jurisdiction, often with different procedures and legal systems, are clear. In cases where the member state has assumed responsibility for the investigation of military or police personnel and has substantiated the allegation of SEA, the UN may repatriate the perpetrator, bar him from serving in future UN peacekeeping missions, and contribute suspended pay to the Trust Fund. Throughout the investigation and disciplinary process, victims are supposed to receive support through the Trust Fund.

There has been increased scholarship on SEA in peacekeeping missions in the last 20 years (Burke, 2014; Freedman, 2018; Higate, 2007; Jennings, 2014; Ndulo, 2009; Burke, 2014; Westendorf, 2020; Whitworth, 2004; Zalewski, 2017), but less attention to children born of these relationships (Lee & Bartels, 2020: 181; Wagner et al., 2020). Simic & O'Brien (2014) explored jurisdictional and legal challenges in enforcing accountability for peacekeeper fathers, concluding that little responsibility lies directly with the UN and it is rather the purview of individual fathers and member states to support these children. While an important study in UN accountability and support options for PKFC, their research did not include first-person perspectives from women with PKFC and did not fully explore the many institutional and contextual barriers to reporting and pursuing support claims. Our qualitative research, therefore, builds on and adds to the literature on gender and peacekeeping and children born to peacekeeper fathers.

### **Conceptual framework**

The relationships and encounters between Congolese women and peacekeepers cannot be separated from the history and security context of the DRC. Many of these

<sup>3</sup> This article does not critically explore the non-fraternization policy but we think its impacts warrant dedicated empirical investigation. Fraternalization is not included in the definition of SEA and subject to different discipline.

relationships are motivated by the personal and economic insecurity that women and girls experience. The DRC hosts the longest-running and largest UN peacekeeping mission in history, marked by several 'firsts' within the broader history of peacekeeping. One of the first peacekeeping missions following the establishment of the practice by the UN was the United Nations Operation in the Congo (ONUC). ONUC was disbanded in 1964 but the UN maintained a presence in the country which included activities by military observers.

The DRC began hosting its next peacekeeping operation in 1999 with the introduction of the MONUC. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) mandated a formal peacekeeping mission due to a resurgence in fighting. After the fighting between non-state armed groups and the government intensified, MONUC was re-established as MONUSCO with a broad mandate to stabilize the region (Whittle, 2014). The security situation remains highly unstable and is worsening rapidly, particularly in the eastern region. The DRC is ranked 157th out of 163 countries on the 2021 Global Peace Index (IEP 2021), and deaths from attacks by non-state armed groups tripled in the first six months of 2020 compared to the same time period in 2019 (UNJHRO report, August 2020). The Kivu Security Tracker lists 1,200 civilians as having been killed between May 2021 and March 2022. This context of insecurity leads to widespread displacement and lack of trust in both the government and MONUSCO.<sup>4</sup> This context further complicates the already complex and challenging issue of SEA by UN personnel in the DRC.

Research into political economies of peacekeeping analyzes how peacekeeping missions, particularly large-scale and long-term missions, reshape and reorient economic and social relations within host states (Higate & Henry, 2010). Jennings (2014) has considered the economic impacts of peacekeeping through a gendered lens, showing how missions bring with them gendered labor opportunities, both formally and informally, while also at times restricting or reducing alternative means of livelihood. Oldenburg (2015) looks at questions of economic and social shifts related to love, sexuality and intimacy, finding that in Goma, eastern DRC, the unequal economic position of foreign peacekeepers compared to local men and boys has contributed to

important changes in romantic relationships. Many young men reported that they feel unable to compete with the gifts and financial support provided by peacekeepers to their would-be girlfriends. Along with these scholars, we find that intersections between economic and sexual relations are particularly pertinent in contexts where widespread poverty and insecurity are inextricable from all facets of life. While these tensions are certainly present in other conflict-affected contexts, given the scale of the MONUSCO peacekeeping mission – the largest in history – and the high rates of poverty in DRC, these disparities are pronounced. Sexual relations combine with economic shifts most obviously in relation to sex work. Westendorf (2020) writes that long-term, large-scale peacekeeping missions increase demands for commercial sex, while poverty and reduced formal employment opportunities act as push factors driving community members to engage in sex work.

In the DRC, sex work is considered to have increased during and following the two Congolese wars (1996–97; 1998–2003) and has continued to be an important source of income for many women and girls (Jennings & Nikolic-Ristanovic, 2013; Maclin et al., 2015; Kiernan et al., 2015). This has had impacts on family and gendered dynamics within eastern DRC, affecting men's perceived roles within households, marriage opportunities and family structures, as well as health outcomes and experiences of violence for women (Kiernan et al., 2015). The women interviewed for this study live in contexts marked by economic and conflict-related insecurity and destabilization, often expressing that they made the choice to have sexual interactions or relationships with peacekeepers due to poverty. We argue that the financial insecurity they experience is a result of the larger security context of the DRC, which is inexorably connected to its colonial history. For this reason, the relationships themselves must not be dehistoricized and rather should be understood as taking place within a post-colonial, gendered and racialized landscape, having been shaped and reshaped through decades of imperial, economic and gendered violence (Hunt, 2008; Mertens, 2016). The impact of these relations further influences the ability of reporting and investigative process, and the limited outcomes available for women.

In engaging with questions of reporting and justice, it is necessary, then, to position interpersonal violence and exploitation within a larger context of structural violence, or, as Farmer (2004) described, 'the social machinery of oppression'. Research has demonstrated connections between structural and interpersonal violence in numerous contexts (Bourgois, 2003; Gready et al., 2010; Gamlin

<sup>4</sup> Please see 'DR Congo: Dozens detained in Beni during anti-UN protests', Al Jazeera, 8 April 2021 (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/8/dr-congo-dozens-detained-in-beni-during-anti-un-protests/>)



& Hawkes, 2018), with authors demonstrating that manifestations of structural violences such as poverty, marginalization, lack of access to essential services like healthcare and education, lack of social and political mobility, and racism lead to increased interpersonal violence including gendered violence (Scheper Hughes, 1993; Gamlin & Hawkes, 2018). Engaging in activities often considered to be sexual exploitation, such as sex work or transactional sex with peacekeepers, has been demonstrated as being directly driven by poverty and need for protection (Fraulin et al., 2021). This intersection of age, poverty and protection demonstrates the structural violence faced by girls living in contexts marked by armed conflict. In some regions where this data was collected, there is ongoing and increasing armed conflict, with 1.7 million people displaced in Ituri province alone (Norwegian Refugee Council, February 2022) and increasing attacks on IDP camps and temporary settlements (UN News, 3 February 2022).

Poverty, displacement and insecurity also drive women into sex work and transactional sexual relationships, including with peacekeepers (Jennings, 2014). Haiti-based research by Lee & Bartels (2020) found that pregnancies resulting from sexual interactions with peacekeepers worsened women's poverty as they were largely unable to access the financial and social supports needed to care for their children. This produced a cyclical outcome whereby women are driven into sexual relationships with peacekeepers out of poverty and insecurity, but rather than their situation improving, they find themselves in worse economic conditions (Lee & Bartels, 2020). This, in turn, may increase women's vulnerability in times of armed conflict or other humanitarian crises: impoverished women are overrepresented in IDP and refugee camps, and socio-economic status is an important indicator of women's survival in humanitarian crises (Ni Aolin, 2011). In humanitarian contexts, the impact of this rights violation may increase women's vulnerability to further hardship and violence. Better understanding experiences and outcomes of SEA, including for mothers of PKFC, we argue, has important implications for peace and conflict studies broadly, as well as implications for humanitarian interventions and policy making.

## Methods

A community-based SenseMaker<sup>®</sup> survey was used to explore broader host community perceptions about how UN peacekeepers interact with local women/girls. The SenseMaker survey was also used to identify women/girls

who had had sexual interactions with peacekeepers and these SenseMaker participants were invited to conduct a follow-up in-depth interview. The qualitative results presented here derive from the in-depth interviews but are additionally supported by the quantitative data from the SenseMaker survey.

### *Location and participant selection*

Six UN bases in eastern DRC<sup>5</sup> were chosen based on size, years of operation, troop-contributing countries staffing the base, and geographic variation. Within a 30 km perimeter of each of the six bases, a convenience sample of prospective participants were approached in public locations including market areas, street vendors, shops, public transportation stops and depots, etc. Individuals aged 13 and older were eligible to participate, with a variety of participant subgroups targeted to capture a wide range of perspectives. Any person in the public space was eligible to participate and the final dataset was 52% women, 48% men.

### *SenseMaker<sup>®</sup> Survey*

SenseMaker is a research tool that extracts meaning from micro-narratives shared about a topic of interest. The current research focused on interactions between Congolese women/girls and foreign UN personnel. Participants were presented with three story prompts and were then asked to audio record a brief narrative based on the prompt of their choice. After recording the story, participants then interpreted their story by responding to a series of predefined questions in which they plotted their perspectives on a tablet between two possible options (i.e. dyads) or three possible options (i.e. triads). Responses to the dyads and triads generated quantitative data with each data point linked to an accompanying micro-narrative. Demographic information and data to contextualize the shared story (e.g. how often do the events in the story happen, who was the story about, etc.) were collected via multiple-choice questions.

The survey was written in English by a multidisciplinary team. It was translated from English to Lingala and Swahili, and then independently back-translated to check for accuracy. The survey intentionally did not prompt for stories about sexual relations, sexual exploitation/abuse, sexual assault or about children fathered by UN personnel to allow stories about a range of topics to emerge naturally from participants' lived experiences.

<sup>5</sup> The bases were located in or near the communities of Beni, Bunia, Bukavu, Goma, Kalemie and Kisangani.

### *Local partners*

The study was implemented in collaboration with two local partners. Multidisciplinary Association for Research and Advocacy in the Kivus by United Junior Academics, or MARAKUJA Kivu Research, is a non-profit organization of Congolese researchers.<sup>6</sup> MARAKUJA has extensive experience designing, organizing and implementing large-scale data collection projects in all regions of DRC since 2009. The other partner was Solidarité Féminine pour la Paix et le Développement Intégral, or SOFEPADI.<sup>7</sup> SOFEPADI is a Congolese non-governmental organization established in 2000 to promote women's rights and advocate for equal access to basic social justice. SOFEPADI guided the cultural and ethical aspects of the research design, survey development and study implementation.

### *Study implementation*

Twelve Congolese research assistants were selected. The six female and four male MARAKUJA research assistants were experienced data collectors, while the two female SOFEPADI research assistants had experience working with survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Male research assistants primarily interviewed male participants while female research assistants primarily interviewed female participants. All research assistants completed a five-day training prior to data collection. Recorded micro-narratives were transcribed and then translated from Lingala/Swahili to English by native speakers. All interviews were conducted in private in the participant's choice of Lingala or Swahili. Micro-narratives were audio recorded and the interpretation questions answered directly on the tablet.

### *Qualitative interviews*

All female participants in the SenseMaker study who shared a first-person story about sexual interactions with UN personnel were invited to participate in an additional in-depth interview. These separate surveys were conducted by the SOFEPADI interviewers with unique questionnaires: one for those who had had sexual interactions but were not raising a peacekeeper-fathered child and another for those who were raising peacekeeper-fathered children. All semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted in private in Swahili or Lingala and were audio recorded. The more in-depth interviews were typically conducted immediately following the

SenseMaker survey. In some cases interviews were conducted in the 24–48 hours following the SenseMaker survey depending on the participant's availability and preference. Most were conducted at the participant's home or in another location of the participant's choosing. Light refreshments such as biscuits and cold beverages were offered to participants during the interview, and if travel had been required, transportation costs were also reimbursed. If the interview had to be scheduled at a later time, mobile phone credit was provided to the participant to make the necessary arrangements. Verbal informed consent was obtained at the beginning of each interview. All audio recordings were transcribed and translated from Lingala/Swahili to English.

### *Ethics considerations*

Informed consent was presented in Lingala/Swahili. No identifying information was collected and completed surveys were anonymous. No financial compensation or other incentive was provided for the brief SenseMaker survey (approximately 15 min) and light refreshments as well as any necessary transportation fees were provided for the qualitative interviews. Participants as young as 13 were included because anecdotally we knew they are impacted by SEA and as such we considered it unethical not to include their perspectives in a minimal risk study. Parental consent was not sought since the adolescents were considered mature minors and asking parents for consent can introduce bias and lead to intrafamily conflict (Weir, 2019). Longer interviews about SEA were only held with women aged 16 and up.<sup>8</sup> Any participant who became upset or required counseling/follow-up services was referred to SOFEPADI using a dedicated referral card. Furthermore, each team had a SOFEPADI interviewer to provide immediate support if needed. Approval for this study was provided by the Queen's University Health Sciences and Affiliated Teaching Hospitals Research Ethics Board (protocol # 6020398) and by the Congolese National Committee of Health Ethics (CNES).

### *Analysis*

Qualitative analysis of transcripts from the 58 semi-structured interviews<sup>9</sup> was conducted collectively and

<sup>6</sup> MARAKUJA <https://marakujakivuresearch.com/>

<sup>7</sup> SOFEPADI <https://www.sofepadirdc.org/>

<sup>8</sup> Interviews describing sexual interactions with younger girls were retrospective.

<sup>9</sup> In total we interviewed 64 women who were raising children fathered by peacekeepers. A total of 58 interviews are included in this article as this was the number of women who clearly identified

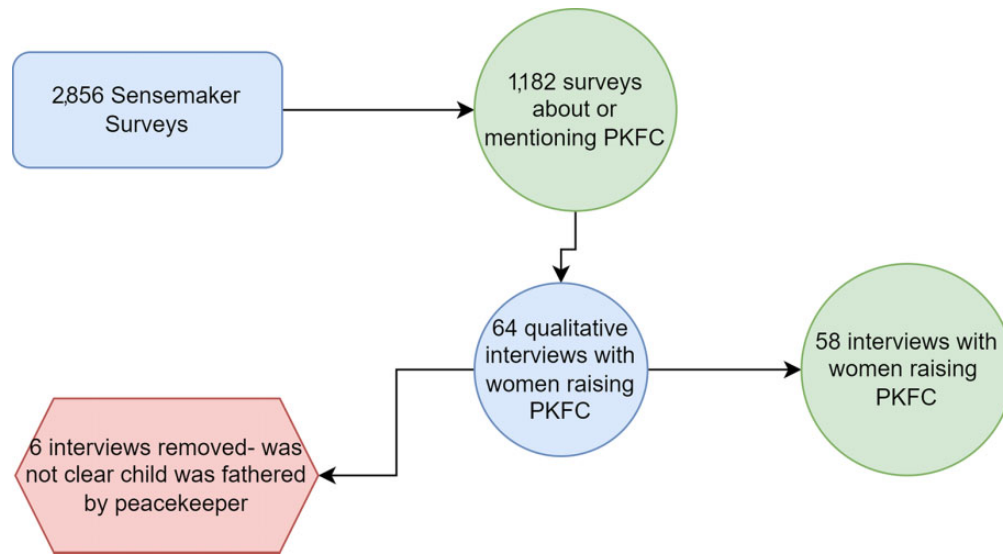


Figure 1. Flow diagram for sampling of SenseMaker (SM) narratives and qualitative interviews. Green indicates data used in this article

codes were generated using both an inductive and deductive approach based on initial read-throughs of the complete interview set and research findings from Lee & Bartels (2020) based on a similar SenseMaker project conducted in Haiti. The authors each read through all of the interviews to determine prevalent themes and cross-checked these for relevance across locations. From here exact codes were generated and each of the authors coded the interviews. Interviews were coded for participant demographics including age, marriage status, reference to socio-economic status; conditions surrounding the encounter(s) with the peacekeeper, including poverty, sex work, transactional sex, dating relationship and sexual assault; whether violence occurred and the nature of the violence; attempts at reporting and outcome; support accessed; and ongoing needs. Interviews were compared first within each location and then across locations. Following the coding, the key themes discussed below (knowledge of pregnancy/child, attempts at reporting, support needs) emerged as the most prevalent across

location and demographics. We calculated the percentage for each theme across interviews and have included illustrative quotations<sup>10</sup> to add contextual richness. Poverty as a driving factor was also central in the interviews, connected closely to reporting and support needs, and adding important context for understanding the sexual encounters. We adopted an iterative and interactive approach to coding and thematic analysis, working together as a team and jointly interpreting the interview data. This approach was adopted in recognition of the value of interpretative qualitative approaches that need not mirror quantitative analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006)

SenseMaker quantitative data ( $n = 2,856$  including both male and female respondents) was analyzed separately to complement the qualitative analysis of the in-depth interviews and is presented in Figures 2, 3, 4 and 5. Responses to the dyad questions generate histograms representing the spectrum of possible answers from one extreme to the other. For the purposes of this analysis, the three bars at either end of the histogram were combined to represent the most extreme responses. Dyad responses were analyzed in SPSS (IBM SPSS Statistics 24.0.0.0) using the Kruskal–Wallis  $H$  test with a chi-squared test statistic to examine if the bar areas were statistically different between chosen groups (in this case between those who shared narratives about sexual interactions and those who did not share narratives about sexual interactions as per Figure 3) (Webster, 2014;

that the father of their child is a peacekeeper, could identify the individual who fathered their child, and were interviewed using the ‘mother’ interview guide rather than a separate interview guide developed for SEA survivors. Two of the 58 interviews were with foster mothers rather than biological mothers. Interview topics included demographic information, details about how the PKFC was conceived, how the mother and child are currently living, whether they reported and their experience in doing so, or why they did not. Interviews were semi-structured, meaning the interviewers responded to information shared by participants. As a result, the exact topics covered varies between interviews.

<sup>10</sup> Quotations have been lightly edited to correct for grammatical or spelling errors in the English translations.

**In the story shared, it would have helped the woman or girl most to have had support from....**

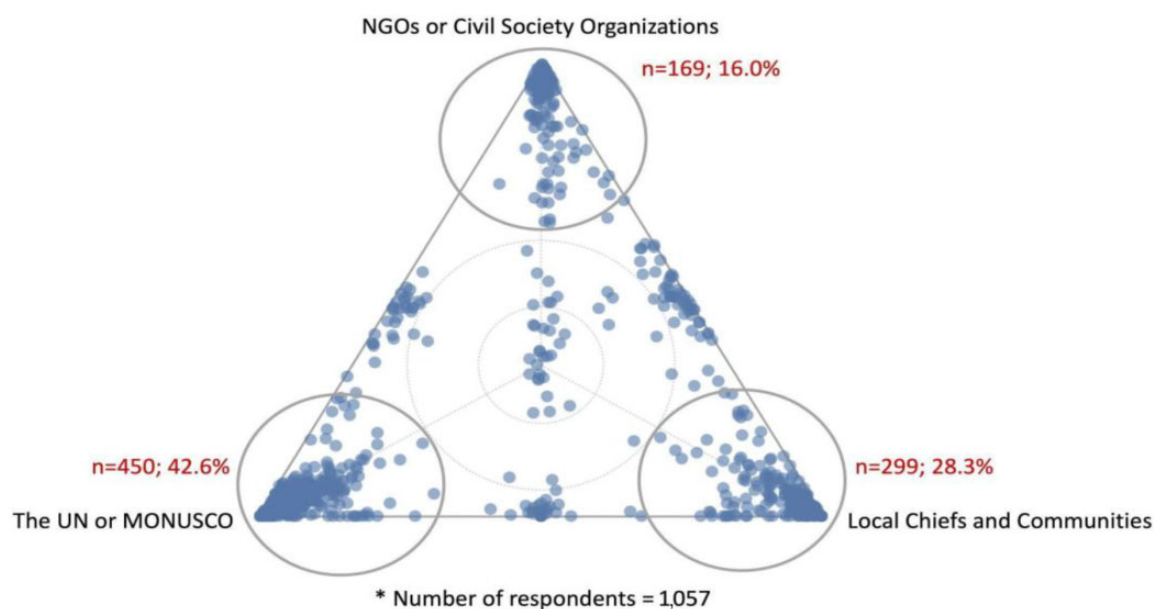


Figure 2. Triad question asking about support. Each dot represents an individual participant's response. The percentage of responses in each of the vertices is presented

**In the story shared, it would have helped the woman or girl most to have had support from....**



Figure 3. Triad question asking about support with geometric mean and surrounding 95% confidence ellipse shown. The geometric mean was generated using R scripts to highlight prevailing perspectives

Webster, 2015). Post-hoc analysis using Fisher's Least Squares Difference then identified which groups differed, with  $p$ -values of  $< 0.05$  taken to be statistically significant. For the triad data, geometric means were generated

using R scripts (R version 3.4.0) to highlight prevailing perspectives (Figure 2). Ninety-five percent confidence intervals (CIs) were generated for each geometric mean and are represented visually as confidence ellipses.



In relation to the woman or girl in your story, those in power...

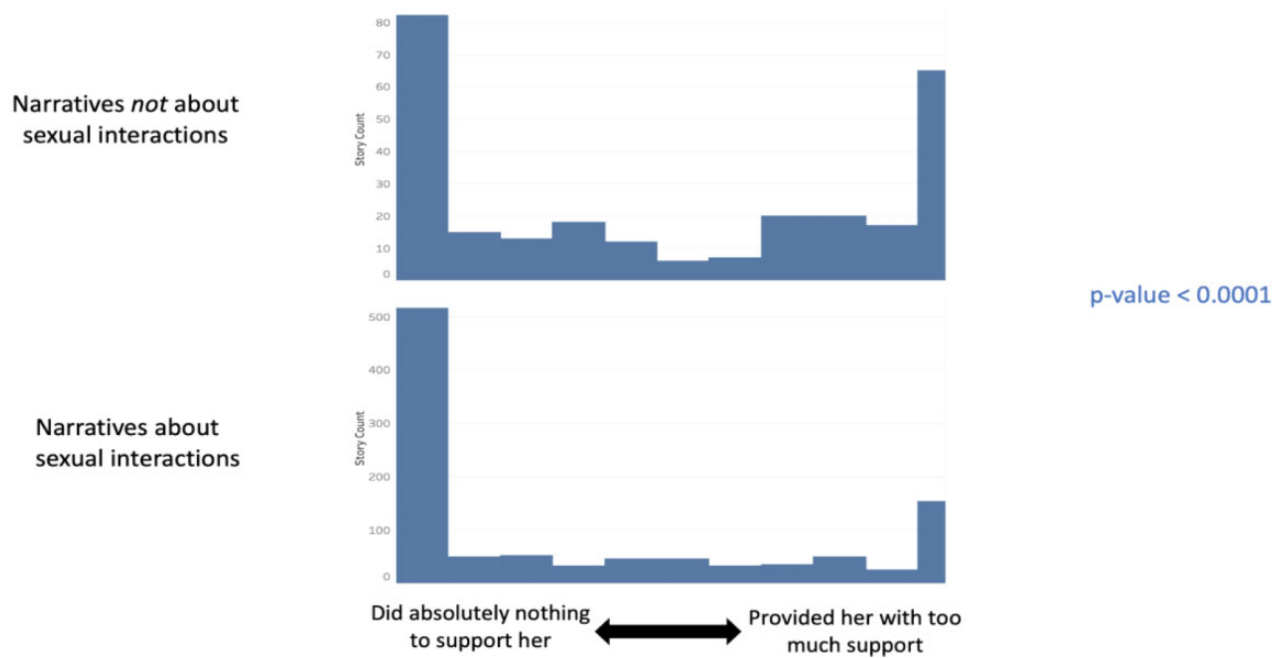


Figure 4. Dyad question asking about perceived level of support disaggregated by whether the narrative was about sexual interactions or not. Dyad responses were analyzed in SPSS using the Kruskal–Wallis  $H$  test with a chi-squared test statistic to examine if the bar areas were statistically different between chosen groups

In relation to the woman or girl in your story, those in power...

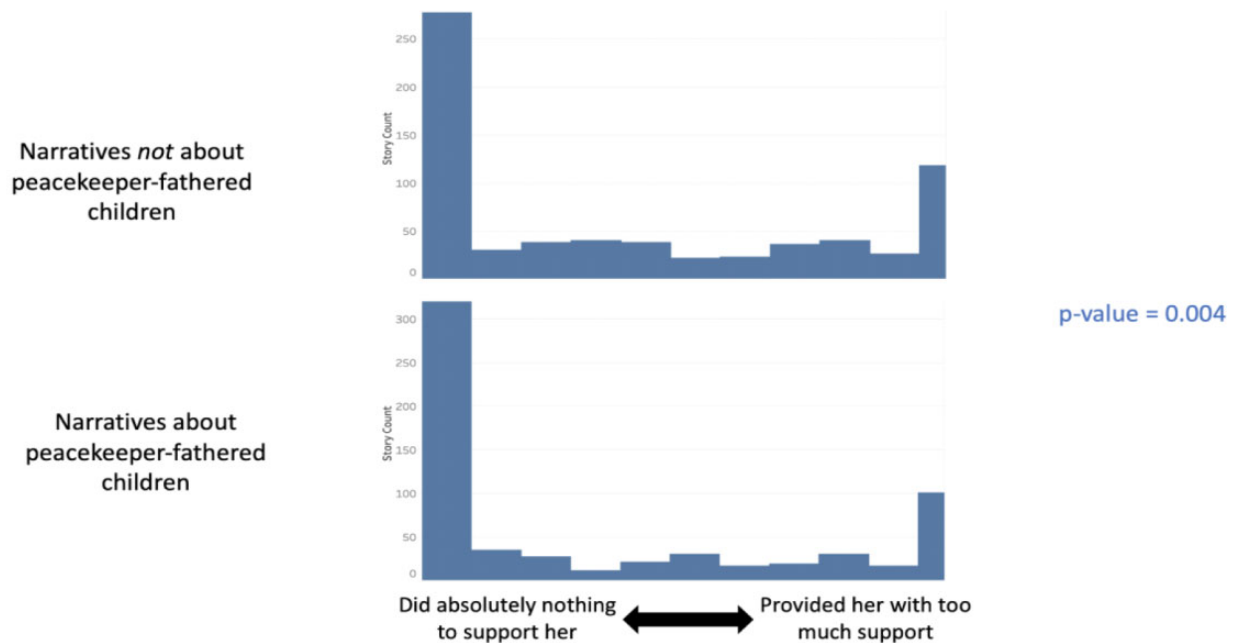


Figure 5. Dyad asking about perceived level of support disaggregated by whether the narrative was about a peacekeeper-fathered child or not

## Key findings

We turn now to the key findings emerging from our qualitative analysis of the interviews with 58 mothers. Of women who both knew and shared their age, the average age of participants at the time of the interview was 27 with a range of 16 to 44. The average age at the time of the sexual encounter was 20, with a range of ten to 36. In total, 44 women indicated the peacekeeper's nationality. Of these, 34% were Tanzanian, 16% were South African and 11% were Moroccan. The remaining nationalities represented included Uruguay, Malawi, Benin, Sudan, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Republic of Congo, Ghana and Guatemala.

The first major finding was that the majority of the MONUSCO personnel described in the mothers' accounts knew of the pregnancy/child and either did not offer or did not keep their promise of support to the mother. It is evident that few mothers received systematic support from either the father or the UN. Second, there was a lack of reporting by mothers to MONUSCO and a lack of follow-up by MONUSCO for cases of alleged violence and PKFC reported to them. Third, a majority of mothers want support either from the child's father or the UN for their children and themselves. The lack of reporting, when juxtaposed with the mothers' expressed needs and desire for support, demonstrates important problems with the current system, both in design and implementation complicated by challenges in securing legal accountability for children fathered by MONUSCO personnel. Following the qualitative interview analysis, the SenseMaker data was cross-referenced in relation to these three key themes to determine if there were significant differences between broader community responses and the experiences of the women interviewed. Qualitative analysis revealed few differences in the narratives shared in the SenseMaker survey and those from the interviews. Within the quantitative SenseMaker sections, there was a strong recognition of the support needs of mothers, as demonstrated below.

### *Knowledge of the pregnancy/child*

The majority of MONUSCO personnel implicated knew of the pregnancy or child, yet a minority of the fathers provided support. Forty-seven of 58 mothers discussed whether or not they had told the MONUSCO personnel of the pregnancy. While three did not tell him, 44 did. This means that 93% of the mothers who provided us with this information did tell the father about the pregnancy. The mothers recounted that 93% ( $n = 45^{11}$ ) of them had told the MONUSCO peacekeeper

that they were pregnant. This contrasts with the 20% of peacekeepers who supported the pregnancy and the 9% who supported the pregnancy and child after birth. Support offered by the MONUSCO personnel varied, ranging from providing financial support and paying medical bills to buying clothes for the baby, providing food and so on. Support may have been provided in one or multiple instances, but it was never enough to consistently meet the needs of the mother and her child.

Some mothers described instances where the peacekeeper disappeared after learning of the pregnancy or promised contact and support but never followed through. Cases of peacekeepers providing women with incorrect or unreliable phone numbers were not uncommon. A second common occurrence was of the MONUSCO personnel leaving or being reassigned after learning of the pregnancy. A mother, 20 years old from Bukavu, described her experience by saying, 'This man used to fool me that he would buy a plot of land for me, where I could bring up my child. He had also promised me that he would pay for the child's schooling. Unfortunately, he went away without even telling me goodbye' (Int. 31). The UN and member states exercise the right to repatriate personnel accused of SEA; while intended as a punitive measure or as a part of the formal investigation, repatriation ultimately results in fathers not taking responsibility for their children and often compromises the investigation itself.

A minority of MONUSCO peacekeepers provided at least some support to the mother during pregnancy and/or after the child was born. However, these supports were ad hoc and insufficient to meet the needs of the mother and child. Only 29% ( $n = 17$  of 58) received support of any kind, and none received the systematic support to which they were legally entitled. This is a clear avoidance of parental responsibilities on the part of the peacekeeper.

### *Challenges with reporting*

Twenty-two of the 58 mothers (38%) stated they attempted to report their pregnancy or child to MONUSCO. While details were not provided in all interviews, mechanisms of reporting included going to the base or reporting directly to MONUSCO personnel ( $n = 7$ ),

<sup>11</sup> *N* is included for each finding; however these numbers represent only the women who specifically spoke about this specific finding. For example, 45 women recounted they had told the peacekeeper they were pregnant, three mentioned they had not told the father, and ten did not provide this information. This same approach is used throughout the Key Findings section.

telling a staff member at a community-based organization<sup>12</sup> ( $n = 4$ ), or being approached by a MONUSCO staff member asking if they have PKFC ( $n = 3$ ). Three mothers from Beni said that MONUSCO staff had visited the area asking women if they or someone they knew had children with a Tanzanian peacekeeper. The children whose mothers said yes were then administered a DNA test. Two mothers reported that some women received jobs on the base following the DNA test, but they personally did not receive any support. Of the mothers who reported,<sup>13</sup> none received the interim support they were mandated to receive during the course of the investigation. Some mothers who attempted to report shared their frustrations with not receiving clear answers and information from MONUSCO, such as this 29-year-old mother from Bunia, who explained that ‘My family and I followed up at MONUSCO, but we got disappointed. They were only moving us around with the case’ (Int. 55). It is important to emphasize that MONUSCO is obligated to launch investigations in all cases. Concerningly, none of the mothers interviewed reported routine and regular follow-up on their reports: ‘MONUSCO knows that there are so many children that were left by its agents. They only give promises that they never carry’ (Int. 58). None of the participants mentioned going through a formal UN investigation process with a clear conclusion. One mother explained how she was requested to go to a meeting at the base only for it to be canceled multiple times:

I reported this problem to his officials, and they promised that they would relay this information to whom it might concern. They listened to us, and seemed to sympathize with us [...] All the ladies who had children with their employees were requested to meet quite often in order to collect our pleas [...] However,

whenever we showed up for the meeting, it was always put off again until we got discouraged and dropped it. (Int. 28)

Importantly, only 27 mothers stated that they both knew they could report their child to MONUSCO and knew of at least one mechanism for doing so. Therefore, only five women indicated they knew the process for reporting but chose not to make a formal allegation. Fifteen women (26%) clearly stated they had no knowledge of the policy or understanding that they were able to report their children. Others were more equivocal, with some implying they had heard something about reporting but did not know how to proceed with making a formal allegation or where to get more information. This finding highlights a clear gap between the UN’s attempts at community education and sensitization toward SEA and PKFC and the community’s understanding of their rights and the ZTP. It is MONUSCO’s responsibility to provide adequate formal mechanisms for reporting SEA, complete detailed investigations, and for the fathers to ensure that mothers receive the support they are entitled to. However, this is not currently being accomplished, as is evidenced by our finding that none of the mothers who reported receiving systematic support.

### *Support needs*

The mothers interviewed overwhelmingly requested support from either the father or the UN, with 97% ( $n = 32$ ) explicitly stating this. Many of the mothers described the dire circumstances they were living in with accounts such as, ‘When the child weeps because of hunger, I feel very sad. I wish her father was here to give me even 1,000 Congolese francs to buy her some food’ (Int. 3), which comes from a 20-year-old mother in Goma. A 16-year-old mother from Goma said, ‘Currently, we are starving’ (Int. 4). Other mothers described needing financial support to keep their children in school, such as this 27-year-old from Bukavu, who said, ‘I only need some assistance for schooling my child. Today he’s doing the sixth form at primary school, but it’s hard for me to pay his school fees. He runs the risk of leaving school next year because of fees shortage’ (Int. 26).

This qualitative finding is also supported by the quantitative SenseMaker data. For instance, as illustrated in Figure 1, approximately 43% of survey respondents (which included both men and women) indicated that it would have been most helpful to have had support from the UN or MONUSCO. This overshadowed responses for NGOs and civil society organizations (at 16%) as well as local chiefs and communities (at 28%).

<sup>12</sup> Community-based organizations are able to receive complaints by community members and these hold the same legitimacy as reports made directly to the UN. Further, CBOs that are official members of the Community-Based Complaint Networks, established in 2016, have received specialized training in receiving allegations of SEA, securing appropriate documentation and working with the CDT to follow up with subsequent investigations.

<sup>13</sup> There are many ways a woman can report SEA or make a paternity claim to MONUSCO. There are complaint boxes outside each base and in other strategic locations around cities; community-based complaint networks can receive complaints and transfer these to the MONUSCO Conduct and Discipline Team; a woman can report to any UN staff member/MONUSCO personnel and they are obligated to submit a formal report to the CDT. Complainants are also supposed to be allowed access to the base to make an allegation directly to the CDT.

Furthermore, as Figure 2 highlights, the overall geometric mean for responses is closest to UN/MONUSCO, indicating that women and girls affected by SEA expect support mostly from the UN or from the mission.

As illustrated in Figure 3, the need for support was perceived to be higher for women and girls who had experienced SEA than for women and girls who had not, and this finding was statistically significant with a  $p$ -value of  $< 0.0001$ .

Among narratives that included sexual interactions, it was more likely to be perceived that those in power did nothing to support the woman or girl. Similarly, the need for support was perceived to be higher for women and girls who were raising a peacekeeper-fathered child. These results are shown in Figure 4 and were also statistically significant with a  $p$ -value of 0.004.

Among narratives that included peacekeeper-fathered children, it was more likely to be perceived that those in power did nothing to support the woman or girl than in narratives that were not about PKFC.

### **Discussion: 'Justice should be done'**

Over the past 15 years academics, NGOs and UN-commissioned inquiries have grappled with how to prevent SEA, combat impunity and enhance accountability and justice when SEA occurs, and to increase support for PKFC.

The member state/troop-contributing country has a high degree of responsibility to investigate and adjudicate on SEA-related paternity and child support claims (A/RES/62/214). As discussed in relation to the ZTP, child support can only be ordered through the member state courts or via court martial by the troop-contributing military. While limitations in reporting accessibility and initial follow-up are the responsibility of the mission, it is the member state that is required to provide the necessary support to women pursuing child support claims – a requirement that has largely been shirked (CRIN/REDRESS, 2019). To date, there has been little to no success in securing regular compensatory and/or support payments, even in the few instances where cases went forward within the peacekeeper's home state. CRIN and REDRESS authored a 2019 report wherein they describe cases across peacekeeping missions where compensatory and/or support payments had been adjudicated within member states, finding that even in the few instances where allegations have advanced through to this final stage, there are few if any provisions ensuring payments are actually made, and in many cases the process itself was traumatizing and exclusionary to the claimant. The

experiences described in the report, as well as in the interviews and SenseMaker narratives analyzed for this article, show interactions that fall far short of the victim-centered approach the UN promotes:

I have a friend of mine who lives at Mavivi. She had a baby with a Tanzanian. That girl's peacebaby is now 1.5 years old. Those contingents have already left for their country. Someday, they called us at MONUSCO, we women who have children with Tanzanians, but they didn't support us so we are suffering in order to raise those children. (Beni, SenseMaker)

In March 2020, lawyers working on SEA and UN paternity cases with two separate NGOs reported to us that the length of time required to secure any financial support was a significant barrier to advancing child support claims (personal communication Tasker and Bartels). In contexts of poverty and insecurity, women simply cannot hold out hope for years that they may receive support for children who are hungry and out of school today. In our findings, most women were aware that SEA was against UN policy and in some cases was illegal. They were less certain about options, however, as even those who made formal reports did not receive the support required. As an alternative, women often choose short-term, more certain, albeit informal, compensation from individuals, either the father or members of his contingent (personal communication, 2020), over the uncertainty of longer-term litigious efforts, even if the potential support from the latter may have been greater. These findings reveal how the patriarchal structures of the legal redress mechanisms within the UN institutions and troop-sending countries disadvantage already vulnerable women (see also Mudgway, 2018).

PKFC born from consensual relationships do not fall within the purview of criminal justice mechanisms, so are excluded from these proposals for redress. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres recently positioned all PKFC as separate from children born as a result of rape in conflict (UNSC Report S/2022/77). Guterres directs readers toward his 2021 special report on SEA for a discussion of PKFC. This latter report, however, devotes limited attention to the needs of PKFC; does not encourage the same actions from member states regarding citizenship, financial, educational, or psychosocial support; and fails to employ the strong rights-based language seen in the 2022 report on children born of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) (UNSG Report 2021/75/134/154). This demonstrates a stark differentiation in UN consideration of children born of



CRSV and PKFC, despite their experiencing many of the same challenges and hardships, including poverty, deep community stigma and lack of access to education, as established in our key findings (Wagner et al., 2020). Differentiating PKFC from other children born of sexual violence and exploitation in conflict further neglects the contexts leading to these children's conception, birth and life struggles.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) makes clear that all children have the right to a standard of living that properly supports their development (Article 27). State parties have a responsibility to support children whose parents are unable to meet this threshold. Article 27 further establishes that state parties must exercise all possible means to ensure proper support is provided from both parents, whether they are at home or abroad. Article 18 clearly positions both parents as having equal responsibility for the care of their child. This language establishes the responsibility of parents and the rights of children to receive 'maintenance', understood as child support, from their parents and this should not be limited or reduced by virtue of where one parent resides. State parties have a clear responsibility to do more to support paternity testing and provision of child support for PKFC. We would argue that this should include specific and separate provisions for child support in the form of both monthly cash disbursements and payment of school fees for children determined to be a PKFC. The UN Circle of Leadership should advocate for DNA banks for military and police personnel to be made accessible for paternity testing by the UN, and for all mission member countries to approve DNA field testing. The member state may then garnish the wages of the individual peacekeeper or, in cases where this is not possible, the state itself should be held responsible for child support payments. In instances where the member state does not comply or delays payments, the UN should be responsible for covering these payments and may bill the member state.

This system of accountability removes the concern expressed by senior MONUSCO personnel that direct compensation will result in false allegations (personal communication, March 2020), as paternity will be proven before payments are released and will jointly hold individual peacekeepers, the member state and the UN fiscally responsible for PKFC. This accountability model will not necessarily work well for civilian staff as they participate in the mission as individuals rather than as part of a MOU/SOFA. It would, however, be an important and meaningful development as the majority of mothers in our study identified the fathers as soldiers.

A potential drawback in this approach is the ongoing difficulty in securing peacekeeping troops for dangerous stabilization missions; it is possible increased scrutiny and financial costs may further dissuade some countries from participating. However, we have seen examples of countries proactively redressing SEA perpetrated by their troops, demonstrating genuine concern with promoting the ZTP and holding perpetrators accountable.<sup>14</sup> This type of leadership may propel other states to act similarly in defense of their reputation for positive participation in UN activities.

## Conclusion

Our research findings demonstrate three persistent and significant challenges in enforcing UN policy within the MONUSCO peacekeeping mission in eastern DRC from a gender-just perspective: how to make avenues for reporting more accessible, routine and transparent; how to prevent sexual exploitation, abuse and unwanted pregnancies of local community members; and how to support the mother should a peacekeeper-fathered pregnancy occur. Our qualitative interviews and SenseMaker data indicate that MONUSCO has yet to properly implement and clarify the ZTP as evidenced by continued paternity cases involving MONUSCO personnel. The dearth of financial support provided is evidenced by the 38% of mothers interviewed who tried to make a paternity claim to MONUSCO without receiving systematic support for their child, few having any information about an investigation and limited follow-up from MONUSCO. Ninety-seven percent of respondents stated they are in serious need of support to care for their children. While this article has emphasized the lived experiences of mothers trying to access support for their children, it became apparent that any discussion around barriers to reporting would be incomplete without also considering the context participants were living in, marked by displacement, poverty and lack of socioeconomic mobility.

This study raises a number of important issues for further consideration. The women who entered into consensual relationships often spoke of their peacekeeper partners in a loving manner while still emphasizing financial (in)security as a driving factor behind the relationship. Other women were assaulted while working on

<sup>14</sup> South Africa, for example, has been proactive in holding court martial in the DRC to increase visibility of accountability measures and has routinely deployed national investigators on SEA allegations (<https://monusco.unmissions.org/>).

a UN base or engaging in commercial activities near the base. These intersections of poverty, unequal gender relations and lack of accountability for peacekeeper fathers results in women living in worse socio-economic conditions than before the interaction with the peacekeeper, contributing to their children living in poverty, lacking access to education and having uncertain futures. These intergenerational effects are important in their own right and may also contribute to ongoing insecurity in the region by increasing the vulnerability of young people to recruitment by armed groups (Onuoha, 2014). This has important implications for future peace and security of the region, as current cycles of poverty, displacement and vulnerability to violence both result from and contribute to worsening conflict.

While MONUSCO must hold peacekeeping personnel and member states accountable for pregnancies and must increase the accessibility and transparency of reporting and investigative processes, it is also imperative that the UN consults with community members on how to improve reporting and follow-up measures: this would demonstrate a commitment to community-oriented and gender-just peacekeeping. While progress has been made in engaging communities through expanding reporting mechanisms and enhancing community education, it is yet to be determined if there may be a better way to respond to SEA at the community level or to support survivors and their children. Rather than a technical challenge related to improving the systems in place, it may be that different systems could be designed in collaboration with communities, possibly resulting in increased reporting and more appropriate and timely supports. This is an area we will explore in future research.

MONUSCO's emphasis on combatting sexual violence and promoting the rights of children in the DRC (UNSCR 2053; 2098) is an important contribution to peacekeeping; however, these commitments are unfortunately undermined by continued sexual abuses committed by UN personnel and the lack of support for PKFC. Substantive cultural change within the design and execution of missions is necessary to work toward gender-just peacekeeping that benefits all members of host communities, and a child-centered approach should be employed to secure the rights of PKFC in the DRC and beyond.

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## Replication data


The dataset, codebook, and do-files for the empirical analysis in this article can be found at <https://www.prio.org/journals/jpr/replicationdata> and <https://borealisdata.ca/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.5683/SP3/MFTXUZ>.


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