

International Relations Global Bachelor's Degree

Bachelor's Thesis

**Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by UN Peacekeepers:
Treating the Symptoms but not the Disease**

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Abstract and Keywords

Sexual exploitation and abuse have been a major issue among UN peacekeeping troops for several decades now. Despite years of efforts to stop it, new reports are regularly registered. This Bachelor's thesis tries to answer two main questions. The first one concerns why sexual exploitation and abuse by UN peacekeepers is such a persistent issue. It points to insufficient training, a prevailing culture of impunity, militarized masculinity, and corruption and a lack of resources as the underlying causes. The second question explores what some of the potential solutions to this problem might be. First, the existing UN strategies are explained. Then, some proposed strategies are highlighted, such as the need for better vetting and training processes, a new accountability mechanism to end impunity, naming and shaming strategies, and the need to include more women in peacekeeping troops. It concludes that the UN must focus less on remedial actions, and more on prevention of SEA by addressing the root causes behind it.

Keywords: United Nations, SEA, peacekeeping, accountability, gender equality

Abbreviations

DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
ICC	International Criminal Court
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OIOS	Office of Internal Oversight Services
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SEA	Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
SOFA	Status of Forces Agreement
TCC	Troop Contributing Country
UN	United Nations
WHO	World Health Organization

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1. Introduction

United Nations peacekeeping operations have done invaluable work in harnessing conflict and contributing to peace around the world for several decades now. Since the first peacekeeping mission was established in 1948, more than 1 million peacekeepers have served under the UN flag in more than 70 peacekeeping operations. More than 3,500 have lost their lives doing so (United Nations, n.d.-a). Peacekeepers are there to ensure peace and to protect the local population. Sadly, some of them do just the opposite. The first allegations of UN peacekeepers engaging in sexual misconduct appeared in the early 1990's. Since then, there have been about 2,000 reports of young adults and children being sexually exploited or abused by UN personnel (Dodds, 2017). It has remained a persistent problem throughout the years - a "cancer" in the UN system, as former Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon put it in 2015 (Sieff, 2016).

The stories are many. A 14-year-old girl in Central African Republic explained how a UN soldier dragged her into his barracks and raped her, leaving her pregnant with a baby boy: yet another "peacekeeper baby" (Sieff, 2016). In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, more than 150 allegations of abuse and exploitation were registered against peacekeepers in the early 2000's, often including prostitution and survival sex with orphans. The UN Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) found that peacekeepers engaged in sex with girls aged 11-14 in exchange for small sums of money or bits of food, such as two eggs or some chocolate (Sieff, 2016; Vojdik, 2019). A girl in Haiti said that, between the age of 12 and 15, she had sex with nearly 50 peacekeepers, including a "Commandant" who gave her 75 cents. A teenage boy was gangraped by a group of peacekeepers who filmed the assault on a cellphone. Also in Haiti, at least 134 peacekeepers exploited nine children in a sex ring from 2004 to 2007. 114 of them were sent home, but none of them imprisoned (Dodds, 2017). These are only a few examples among the thousands of cases of rape, sexual assault, exploitation, and other sexual misconduct by United Nations peacekeeping personnel.

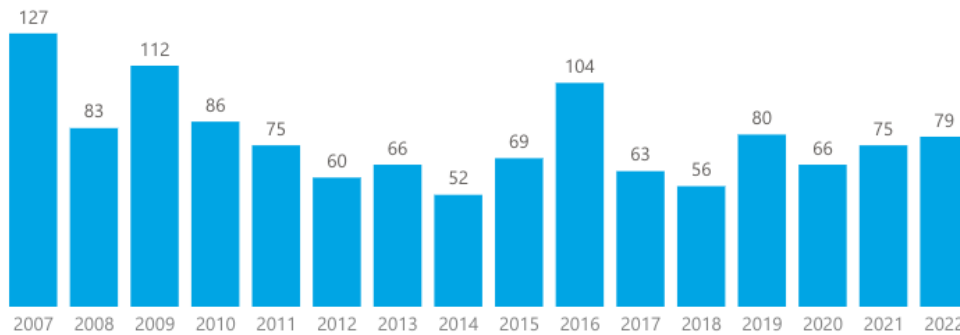
Sexual abuse is not uncommon in conflict situations. Rebel groups and national army soldiers often use sexual violence as a weapon of war, especially against small children and women. A 2021 report by NGO Save the Children found that out of the 426 million children who live in conflict zones around the world, 72 million of them, or one in six, live 50 kilometers or closer to conflicts where armed groups or forces are known to perpetuate sexual violence against children. The vast majority of the victims are girls (Sapiezynska, 2021). In addition, sexual violence is often a major problem within the civil society as well, especially during and

after conflict. Many countries emerging from armed conflict experience very high numbers of incidents of sexual and gender-based violence due to post-conflict poverty, lack of livelihood opportunities and weakened rule of law, putting women and children in a particularly vulnerable position (Bastick et al., 2007).

Then, there are international workers who come to work in conflict situations and help and protect the local population but end up taking advantage of them instead. UN peacekeepers are of course not the only international staff to do this. There are plenty of examples of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by other UN agencies and NGO staff as well, including Oxfam, World Vision, and Medecins Sans Frontieres, to name a few (Dodds, 2021; Mednick & Craze, 2022). Nonetheless, there are two main differences between UN peacekeepers and other humanitarian staff who have been accused of SEA. First of all, the majority of the peacekeepers involved in allegations of SEA are military personnel. This means that they are uniformed military soldiers who usually carry weapons, thus exhibiting a certain type of authority which can be intimidating to individuals whose communities are in, or recovering from, conflict. Second, there is a distinction to be made between the United Nations and other international organizations. The UN is by far the world's largest intergovernmental organization, made up of the nations of the world to work together for peace and prosperity. It is made up of states, that deploy peacekeeping operations in other states in order to maintain peace. It is baffling that such a powerful organization has not been able to better combat this issue after more than three decades.

A natural first step when investigating this issue is to take a look at the existing data to get a better grip of how widespread this problem is. The United Nations has a quite complete database for reports of sexual misconduct with data going back to 2007. Much more comprehensive data has been included since 2013, and since 2015 information on the nationality of the perpetrator is also available, as well as more detailed information about interim actions, investigations, and actions by Member States (United Nations, 2023a). The database is updated whenever there is a new report. Below is a graph showing the total number of allegations per year from 2007 to 2022.

Figure 1: Sexual Exploitation and Abuse over time



Total number of allegations per year. From the United Nations (2023) Database.

An allegation is defined as “*uncorroborated information pointing to the possible occurrence of misconduct*”, and only leads to an investigation if enough information is available. An allegation can implicate one or more alleged perpetrators, and one or more victims. If a report involves personnel from more than one category or more than one Member State, it is counted individually for each track of accountability (United Nations, 2023a). When looking at the graph, the total number of allegations seemed to be steadily decreasing between 2007 and 2014. In the last few years, however, the numbers are going back up. Whether this demonstrates an actual rise in the number of cases or simply in the number of registered reports is unknown.

While it is clearly important to keep track of the trends in the statistics, and they can give a certain indication on how prevalent the issue is, it is quite unclear to what extent they represent the reality. It is important to keep in mind that this database only includes official reports that have been handled by the UN. In reality, there are almost certainly considerably more cases of SEA than what is included here. UN Women (2022) found that as little as less than 10% of women who experience sexual violence worldwide appeal to the police, a number that is likely to be higher in conflict situations. Less than 40% seek help of any sort (UN Women, 2022). In situations where Peacekeepers are involved, reporting is likely to be exceptionally low because of fear and the lack of reporting mechanisms available to the victims. For example, a victim may be expected to write a report and put it in a mailbox at the UN camp even though they don’t know how to write and have to risk their life to get to said mailbox. Additionally, one can only imagine being forced to go back to the same organization whose personnel raped you in order to report it. In cases involving prostitution or transactional sex, there is even an economic disincentive to report misconduct (Stern, 2015).

On top of that, many victims have experienced extremely unsatisfactory reporting in the past and have generally little trust in authority (Stern, 2015). Even the few women who do try to report are often not taken seriously and receive little or no compensation. To give an example, Wagner (2022) interviewed 26 mothers in DRC who had contacted UN peacekeeping authorities to report a paternity case. For the majority of them, the complaint was outright ignored or rejected, and only one fifth were undergoing investigations or legal cases. None of them had received legal compensation. Many also described situations where corruption interrupted investigations. Such misconduct certainly doesn't encourage victims to report misconduct, nor does it send the right message to perpetrators. Women in Haiti said that after almost two decades of impunity, they just didn't see the point in reporting anymore (Anderlini, 2017). Therefore, the credibility of the official data on allegations when conducting research is somewhat limited. The bottom line is that we know that sexual misconduct among peacekeepers is a problem and that something needs to be done.

There are, of course, measures that have been implemented to eradicate SEA by peacekeepers. The UN has established clear guidelines and standards of conduct that all personnel is required to follow, enhanced training and investigation mechanisms, created a trust fund for victims, and passed several resolutions related to SEA. Still, the database of allegations is regularly updated with new reports of sexual violations.

This thesis aims to contribute to the literature by examining the underlying causes behind peacekeeper SEA and exploring some possible strategies that can help improve the situation. The research question to be answered is: Why is SEA still such a persistent issue among UN peacekeepers and how can it be eradicated once and for all? In order to answer that, some sub-questions also need to be answered, such as: What are the root causes of SEA by peacekeepers? What are the measures already implemented by the UN in response to this and how effective are they? What should be done differently?

The thesis is divided into two main parts. The first main part looks at some of the root causes of peacekeeper SEA. Each subchapter focuses on one root cause. The first one is about training and standards of conduct, explaining that this is important due to the diverse backgrounds peacekeepers have. However, the current training practices are not adequate, and not enough to end SEA. The chapter on immunity explains how functional immunity leads to a lack of accountability and thus a prevalent culture of impunity among peacekeepers. The following chapter outlines militarized masculinity, unequal gender relations and poverty as an underlying cause of SEA in conflict situations. The last two subchapters focus on peacekeeping on the cheap and corruption.

The second part looks into how to eradicate peacekeeper SEA. The first two subchapters outline the existing strategies implemented by the UN, including the UN Voluntary Compact. The last four subchapters dive into strategies that should be adopted by the UN, including improved vetting and training strategies, establishing a permanent accountability mechanism, naming and shaming, and including more women in peacekeeping missions. It concludes that the UN must shift its focus from remedial actions to preventative measures. It needs a new approach that focuses on treating the cancer in its system rather than the symptoms.

2. Sustainable Development Goals

As with any research topic, SEA by UN peacekeepers relates in one way or another to many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, there are two to which it relates most directly: SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). SDG 5 is to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, and thereby to eliminate discrimination, violence, and harmful practices against women and girls, including sexual exploitation and abuse. Sexual exploitation and abuse disproportionately affect women and girls, making gender equality a critical aspect of addressing and preventing these abuses. SDG 5 also emphasizes the importance of ensuring women's full and equal participation in all aspects of society, including in peacekeeping operations (United Nations, n.d.-c). As will be discussed in the second part of this thesis, achieving gender equality within UN Peacekeeping is crucial because it helps create an environment where women are empowered and enhances the overall effectiveness of peacekeeping operations.

Peacekeeper SEA also relates directly to SDG 16 which focuses on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies. It emphasizes the importance of establishing strong institutions, promoting the rule of law, ensuring accountability and transparency, and reducing corruption (United Nations, n.d.-d). These aspects are relevant to combating and preventing sexual exploitation and abuse within UN Peacekeeping operations. Strong institutions are crucial in creating a framework that holds perpetrators accountable and provides justice for survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse. Rule of law is a vital element in that. Strong institutions can also facilitate cooperation between the UN, Member States, and other stakeholders in addressing these issues effectively. Reducing corruption is also essential because it can generate an environment for misconduct by impeding investigation and accountability measures. Strong institutions that prioritize transparency measures can help mitigate the risks associated with corruption.

Nonetheless, it's important to recognize that sexual exploitation and abuse intersect with multiple dimensions of the SDGs. Issues such as poverty (SDG 1), good health and wellbeing (SDG 3), education (SDG 4), decent work (SDG 8), inequality (SDG 10), and global partnerships and collaboration (SDG 17) are all important in efforts to address and prevent sexual exploitation and abuse within peacekeeping operations. The interconnectedness of the SDGs demonstrates the need for a holistic approach to this issue.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the issue of sexual abuse and exploitation by UN peacekeepers, and what can be done to prevent it. The first step in the research process was to look up the existing quantitative data to get a better grip of the scope of the problem. The main source of data has been the UN database of allegations of misconduct, but there are two main limitations to that. The first is that there are certain unclarities in the datasets provided by the UN in terms of accurate numbers of perpetrators and victims involved in each allegation, making it somewhat complicated to analyze the data. Also, the database only goes back to 2007, with more comprehensive data available only for the last 10 years. Secondly, it is expected that many, if not most, of the cases of SEA go unreported and thus never make it to this database. Qualitative data such as journalist interviews among local populations have therefore been an important source of information as well.

After analyzing the scope of the problem, the first question that arises is: Why is SEA by peacekeepers such a persistent issue? The next question is twofold: What efforts are already in place to combat this and what should be done differently? To answer these questions, I have done a deep dive into the existing literature on the topic, both from the UN itself, as well as scholars and other professionals, which was analyzed and synthesized to gain insights into the topic. Online news magazines, scholarly journals, and academic databases have been the primary sources of literature. Unfortunately, I have not been able to conduct interviews with peacekeepers or experts, although this would have been ideal.

Some topics have consciously been left out, such as legal aspects like the possible role of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and international legal agreements, since law is not my field of study. Broad behavioral or psychological analysis of the reasons why some peacekeepers become perpetrators of SEA is not included either. Since the majority of those involved in allegations of SEA are members of the military, the thesis will mainly be focused on, although not limited to, military personnel.

4. Why is SEA by Peacekeepers still such a pressing issue?

First of all, UN peacekeeping personnel are many. Since the founding of the UN, more than one million peacekeepers have been deployed in over 70 operations. Right now, there are more than 70,000 peacekeepers deployed across 12 missions (United Nations, 2023d). When speaking about such large numbers of people, there are bound to be a few bad apples. Sexual violence is an integrated issue in society all over the world. Although it is very difficult to analyze statistics on sexual violence on a global level due to varying definitions and related laws, unreported cases and so on, World Health Organization (2021) estimates that about one in three women globally have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. This makes it a major public health problem. Disappointingly, since it is such a major issue worldwide, it is logical that it appears in peacekeeping missions as well.

However, one major difference between peacekeeping personnel and society at large is that the United Nations is in a unique position to tackle this issue in a whole other way. In a peacekeeping situation, the UN has the opportunity to prevent this from happening through vetting processes and providing specific training, but also to ensure consequences for perpetrators beyond regular criminal justice processes, and to provide support to victims through a special trust fund. With all of the standards of conduct and other measures that are already in place, along with countless reports and proposed strategies on how to combat SEA by peacekeepers, there just don't seem to be many improvements. How can it be, that despite all efforts, it remains such a big issue? The answer is probably a combination of insufficient training, militarized masculinity, a culture of impunity, and a lack of commitment from the main TCCs.

4.1. Training and Standards of Conduct

United Nations peacekeeping personnel come from about 120 different countries (Comstock, 2022). This means that they also have about 120 different cultures and backgrounds, with varying views on women and gender equality. It is natural that they would thus have varying views on how women should be treated, and what constitutes sexual misconduct and not. Training and clear guidelines are therefore a crucial part of eradicating SEA. There are some universal standards of conduct that peacekeepers are supposed to follow, primarily established in the *Ten Rules: Code of Personal Conduct for Blue Helmets* and *We Are*

United Nations Peacekeepers publications, both of which explicitly prohibit sexual exploitation. The 2003 secretary-general bulletin is considered to embody the zero-tolerance against SEA and requires all entities working with the UN to accept its standards. However, it is not legally binding, and it is the TCCs who are responsible for providing such training, and for investigating and punishing allegations of SEA by their nationals (Vojdik, 2019). The pre-deployment training is usually provided by training institutions on a national or sub-national basis in the TCCs (United Nations, 2023b). The UN Secretariat helps to improve this training by providing core training materials and deploying mobile training teams when requested. Troop- and police-contributing countries are also required to certify that their personnel has received training delivered in accordance with UN standards prior to being deployed (United Nations 2023b).

The training requirements have been somewhat effective since about 70-90% of peacekeeping personnel receive at least some training related to SEA (Defeis, 2008). They also receive induction and refresher conduct and discipline training during missions with a particular focus on sexual exploitation and abuse as well as the obligation to report misconduct and how to do it (United Nations, 2023b). Additionally, an online mandatory training programme to prevent SEA was launched in 2016, complementing the pre-deployment training delivered by Member States. It is intended to strengthen training on the standards of conduct and the expectations of accountability (United Nations 2023b). This online course is essentially a series of interactive PowerPoint presentations that explain the standards of conduct and consequences of SEA. They also include a number of different scenarios that make it very clear to the personnel what constitutes SEA (United Nations 2023c). However, it is a self-paced course that can be done individually or in a group, so it is hard to say how thoroughly it is done.

Since most of the training peacekeepers go through is given in and by their home country, the quality of this training may vary. It may also vary depending on how much time is allocated towards it and who is put in charge of the training. Also, most peacekeepers are actually trained for combat, not for building peace, which is further explained in a later section. Since training and standards of conduct have been a core part of the SEA eradication strategy for more than two decades, it has become evident by now that the current training practices are not good enough, and that training alone is not enough to tackle the issue. There is clearly a need to improve, or drastically change, the current training, perhaps with more standardization and better ways for the UN to quality check. At the same time, the case could also be made that most of the peacekeepers who commit sexual misconduct do not do so due to a lack of proper training. It is clearly explained to every person who is deployed on a UN mission that there is

a zero tolerance for SEA, and what this entails. Rather, sexual misconduct is often rooted in militarized masculinity and unequal power relations, which is why much more comprehensive measures are needed.

4.2. Immunity

A prevalent culture of impunity deriving from the immunity of UN personnel is often cited as the main obstacle to eradicating SEA by peacekeepers. Put simply, although immunity varies depending on the type of personnel, UN peacekeepers generally enjoy functional immunity while on mission. This protects them from being prosecuted for acts performed in their official capacity. While there are limitations to this immunity, these are often much broader in practice than in theory (Jennings, 2017). Also, perpetrators are often either repatriated or deployed on another mission before the conclusion of any ongoing investigation (Wagner, 2022). This is problematic both because it makes it much more difficult to conduct investigations, further complicating the accountability issue, but also hinders victims from being properly heard and receiving support, for example in the case of a paternity claim. Say, for instance, that a peacekeeper has raped and impregnated a local woman a few months into his deployment. He might stay put for a few more months, but when the baby is born nine months later, he will be safely back in his home country or redeployed on a different mission far away from potential paternity tests, let alone any child support payments.

In the case of military personnel, who make up the majority of UN peacekeepers as well as the majority of perpetrators behind allegations of SEA (United Nations, 2023a), these are never subject to the host state's jurisdiction (Jennings, 2017). This is mainly because of two types of standing agreements pertaining to UN peacekeeping: Status of Forces Agreements (SOFAs) and Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs). These establish peacekeeper immunity and ensure that only TCCs can prosecute their military personnel for crimes committed on mission, usually in their military justice system (Comstock, 2022; Jennings, 2017). This means that the degree to which military peacekeepers are held responsible in their home country depends heavily on how seriously the TCC takes this responsibility, as well as the quality of its justice system. According to Jennings (2017) and Comstock (2022), criminal prosecution and sanctions for crimes committed on mission as a peacekeeper at a national level are exceedingly rare. Usually, the punishments for SEA by peacekeepers are purely administrative (Jennings, 2017). Additionally, due to the lack of peacekeeping personnel, both SOFAs and MOUs favor terms for TCCs, granting them flexibility and immunity in exchange for troops (Comstock, 2022).

Since 2010, there have been 949 allegations recorded in the UN Database, with 1599 identified perpetrators. The total number of sustained allegations is 306, counting both uniformed and civilian personnel. Out of these 1599 perpetrators, 103 (or 6.4%) have received jail time, while the majority of allegations ended in the alleged perpetrator's dismissal or are still pending investigation (United Nations, 2023a). These numbers are already concerning, but considering the expectedly high number of unreported cases, they're even more alarming. The truth is that very few perpetrators have to face punishment for their actions while on mission. Naturally, this generates a perception among peacekeepers that there are few meaningful consequences for crimes of SEA, which understandably doesn't serve to prevent it from happening. In addition to sending the wrong message to perpetrators, such impunity certainly doesn't give the right signal to the victims either. Not only does it give the perception that they are not taken seriously or cared for, but it also deprives them of much needed support. Evidently, accountability for perpetrators has to be a central part of any strategy to combat SEA.

4.3. Militarized masculinity

Vojdik (2019) has a different view: that it is much more important to focus on the root causes behind SEA in conflict situations. Instead of seeing SEA merely as crimes committed by individual perpetrators, it should be seen as part of the continuum of conflict-related violence against women, rooted in unequal gender relations and poverty. If we want to eradicate the issue, Vojdik argues, we must situate peacekeeper SEA within this context. The focus must shift from simply punishing perpetrators to the larger context of gender violence and inequality, and the UN must help dismantle the structure that perpetuate this.

Peacekeeping troops are mostly trained for warfare, not for building peace. They bring with them their own institutionalized cultures, where they are trained to be aggressive, violent and dominant soldiers, which Vojdik refers to as militarized masculinity. The enemy, on the other hand, is often feminized as weak and powerless. Some peacekeeping troops may even have engaged in sexual violence in previous conflicts where sexual violence might have been used as a weapon. In addition, sexual abuse or coercion might even be acceptable in their culture, leading to normalization of sexual abuse and exploitation. In conflicts where the humanitarian situation is especially precarious and the local population is experiencing hunger and desperation, peacekeeper SEA occurs more frequently. Poverty provides a context for SEA because women often feel compelled to engage in transactional sex for survival, while

peacekeepers are in a power position in comparison. So-called peacekeeper economies also create demand for prostitution and various forms of survival sex (Vojdik, 2019).

Because of this, it is essential to eliminate social and economic gender inequality and to empower women to reduce their vulnerability in post-conflict situations. The international community must therefore provide resources and funding for programs that can improve women's socioeconomic and legal position in post-conflict societies (Vojdik, 2019). While this is a very logical line of thought and clearly something that is important to focus on, it is a long-term solution. There is no denying the importance of empowering women in conflict situations and working towards gender equality, but it doesn't improve the acute situation of women and children who are suffering SEA by peacekeepers right now. Realistically speaking, women's empowerment is going to take a long time. Gender equality and empowering women should therefore be a long-term goal, alongside other measures like improving vetting and training, as well as ensuring accountability.

4.4. The price of cheap peacekeeping

Another issue is that there simply aren't enough peacekeepers available. Comstock (2022) has pointed out that the UN struggles to maintain enough peacekeepers for their missions while also holding perpetrators accountable. The United Nations does not have its own standing troops, ready to deploy when needed. Rather, it relies on the TCCs to send troops on an ad-hoc basis, which they are often reluctant to do since they usually don't have a stake in the conflict. This often results in much too few peacekeepers compared to the area of responsibility, with roughly one peacekeeper per 1,000 square kilometers in Western Sahara, one per 130 square kilometers in Congo, and one per 80 square kilometers in South Sudan (Autesserre, 2018).

Additionally, peacekeeping missions are given way too few resources. With a budget that makes up less than 0.5% of global military spending, they are expected to help resolve more than a quarter of all ongoing wars (Autesserre, 2018). This means that the deployed troops are often poorly trained and poorly equipped, from countries whose governments are eager to send troops in order to keep a certain percentage of their pay but pay little attention to adequate training and preparation. They often also come from cultures where gender inequality is the norm and corruption is widespread, as is further discussed in the following section. These troops are accepted by the UN in desperation of finding enough people, but might not have been under other circumstances (Autesserre, 2018; Comstock, 2022). This demonstrates that the UN puts

more emphasis on simply getting peacekeeping missions deployed than on the quality of them, consequently deprioritizing the local population and victims of SEA (Comstock, 2022).

Again, the UN puts the responsibility on the Member States instead of on the organization itself. The problem with that is that there just isn't enough commitment among the Member States to improve the situation. If there were, Member States would ensure that all peacekeepers were properly trained and prepared before sending them, and held them accountable in cases of misconduct. An example of this is the lacking commitment to the UN Voluntary Compact, which is further developed in a later section. Essentially, the Compact is an agreement between the Secretary-General and the Member States who choose to sign it, about commitment to accountability. By the end of 2021, it had been signed by 105 Member States. That might sound like a lot, but out of the 120 current TCCs, 30 of them didn't sign it, including some of the top contributors and some of the TCCs with the highest numbers of perpetrators of SEA (United Nations, 2021). Unfortunately, there is a lack of commitment among Member States all the way from sending troops, to contributing to the budget, and to ensuring accountability. The price of that is paid by the victims of SEA who suffer the consequences.

4.5. Corruption

Finally, one aspect that is closely related to the previous section but hardly ever mentioned in the existing literature about peacekeeper SEA is that of corruption and what role it might play in this issue. Claims about corruption within the United Nations is nothing new. Whistleblower and former investigator at the UN headquarters Peter Gallo said he believes the organization is "riddled with corruption from bottom to top" (Kotecha & Bell, 2022), to give an example. Unfortunately, the very issue with corruption is that it happens in the dark, which makes it difficult to research, and the existing literature is therefore limited. The global nonprofit association Transparency International, however, has published several reports concerning corruption as an obstacle to peacekeeping, referring to it as a "mission-critical issue" in many operations. Yet, it is often not included in planning and execution, nor in training (Transparency International, 2013).

While there isn't much available research on this, one interesting comparison can be made between the TCCs with the highest numbers of perpetrators and the corruption level in their home country. The top five nationalities by number of alleged perpetrators are South Africa, Cameroon, Gabon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Congo. These are all among

the worst-performing countries on Transparency International's (2022) Corruption Perceptions Index, ranking number 72, 142, 136, 164, and 166 out of 180, respectively. The same is true for most of the countries where ongoing peacekeeping operations take place as well. Just like peacekeeping troops bring with them their own institutionalized military practices on mission, if corruption is widespread and normalized in their home country, it is not unlikely that some peacekeepers see bribery and corruption as a way of getting away with SEA and other misconduct. This is especially true if the peacekeeper earns a higher salary while working for the UN than the corresponding wage in their home country, which is often the case. According to Transparency International (2013), peacekeepers also lack guidance on how to prevent corruption in missions and in the host nation.

There are many different types of corruption that could play a role at several stages in a potential investigation of sexual misconduct. Let's say, again, that a peacekeeper has impregnated a local woman after raping her. The perpetrator could buy the victim's silence, or that of the victim's family, friends, and potential witnesses in exchange for money or gifts, thus preventing an investigation from being opened in the first place. Or, if an investigation is already underway, he could bribe the doctor who is conducting the paternity test to alter the results, as exemplified by Wagner (2022). He could potentially also bribe his superiors in order to avoid the consequences. If none of that works, there is still the possibility to interfere with the legal process if there is widespread corruption in the perpetrator's home country. Therefore, the prevention of corruption needs to receive considerably more attention in the peacekeeping context and must be taken into consideration when developing strategies against peacekeeper SEA.

5. How to eradicate SEA: Some implemented and proposed solutions

Thus far, it's been established that peacekeeper SEA stems from gender inequality and the unequal power relations between local women and peacekeepers in post-conflict-societies, and that it is exacerbated by the lack of accountability. At the same time, UN peacekeeping missions simply aren't given enough resources and there is difficulty finding enough personnel. It is further likely that corruption plays a role, although this is difficult to prove through academic research. Finally, there is a lack of willingness among TCCs to take their share of the responsibility of holding perpetrators accountable. The following section will focus on how the situation can be improved, and some of the possible strategies to combat SEA by peacekeepers. First, the existing UN efforts are shortly addressed. Then, other suggested strategies are discussed.

5.1. Implemented UN measures

There have, of course, been various attempts to tackle peacekeeper SEA throughout the years, with the United Nations implementing several different measures. After increasing reported cases in the 1990's, it shifted towards formalizing protective measures for civilians, especially through the Ten Rules Code of Personal Conduct for Blue Helmets from 1998. It then began integrating SEA prevention into peacekeeper training in 2001. In 2001, there was a new scandal reporting widespread allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation of children by humanitarian workers in refugee camps across Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone. It involved the exchange of sex for food, and rape and exploitation of young boys and girls, including sex with a 15-year-old refugee girl in exchange for the payment of her school fees. Later investigations by the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) discovered peacekeeper involvement in the abuse as well (Comstock, 2022; Vojdik, 2019).

Following scandals led to more focus on the prevention of SEA as well as transparency and effectiveness of investigations. In 2003, the UN General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to take measures to prevent and punish sexual exploitation and abuse in humanitarian and peacekeeping operations. This led to the well-known 2003 Secretary-General bulletin which explicitly prohibited all UN staff from engaging in SEA and embodies the zero-tolerance against it. The bulletin uses broader definitions of rape and abuse, focusing on the abuse of power or trust for sexual purposes. It is not legally binding, but it requires all entities working

with the UN to accept its standards (Vojdik, 2019). There have also been a number of resolutions adopted in the General Assembly regarding SEA over the years (Comstock, 2022).

After over 150 women accused UN peacekeepers in the DRC of SEA in 2004, Secretary-General Kofi Annan appointed the permanent representative of Jordan to the UN, Prince Zeid Ra'ad Zeid al-Husseini, to investigate the allegations (Vojdik, 2019). The following year, the monumental Zeid Report was published. It concluded that the measures in place at the time were inadequate and recommended comprehensive reforms across all categories of personnel. Several of these recommendations were adopted, like the establishment of a Conduct and Discipline Unit (CDU) at the UN headquarters to organize training, monitoring and enforcement activities of peacekeepers. The UN also established standardized measures for outreach and training, and clarified the existing standards of conduct. These measures were adopted as part of a three-pronged strategy to address misconduct, with special emphasis on SEA. It includes prevention, enforcement of standards of conduct, and remedial action. The preventative part of it includes enhanced training and guidelines, as well as increased transparency and effectiveness of investigations. Enforcement activities focus mainly on the repatriation of alleged perpetrators and banning them from participating in future peacekeeping operations. Remedial actions include victim and community support, mainly through the Trust Fund established in 2016 (Comstock, 2022). Importantly, though, the UN did not implement the recommendation of establishing a permanent professional investigative mechanism to investigate serious misconduct, including SEA (Stern, 2015). This would have been an effective measure in terms of accountability for perpetrators, which is further discussed later.

5.2. UN Voluntary Compact

As part of his new Zero Tolerance strategy, António Guterres proposed the Voluntary Compact on Preventing and Addressing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in September 2017. The compact is a non-binding agreement between the Secretary-General and the individual Member States who choose to sign it, as a means of bridging together the UN and TCCs. It is meant as a signal of joint commitment and mutual accountability, which is arguably the main obstacle to eradicating SEA. It was immediately signed by 72 states, and by the end of 2021 it had been signed by 105 Member States (United Nations, 2021). Although non-binding, it is the only international legal agreement created by the UN as part of the renewed focus on peacekeeper SEA (Comstock, 2022).

Comstock (2022) has done extensive research on the Voluntary Compact and tried to do a systematic analysis of the outcomes. While it is still too early to properly analyze the outcomes of the Compact using empirical data, what she found was that signature by a TCC with a record of allegations contributed to a higher likelihood of national-level punishment of accused perpetrators in cases of severe abuse. TCCs who signed were also more likely to donate to the UN Trust Fund for victims of SEA. However, there was no evidence of an overall reduction in the total number of allegations of SEA relating to TCCs who signed the Compact. In addition, 30 of the 120 current TCCs did not sign, including two of the top 10 contributors (Comstock, 2022). Interestingly, some of the countries with the highest number of perpetrators have not signed it either, including Cameroon, Congo, and Burundi (United Nations, 2021). Another criticism of the Compact is that signatories can amend and customize its content without having to make the modified versions public, allowing them to stretch the accountability mechanism (Comstock, 2022).

Comstock argues that UN policy has strengthened over time, moving from mere non-binding General Assembly Resolutions to generally binding Security Council Resolutions with higher threshold for approval. However, authority has never been delegated above the TCCs, demonstrating the shortcomings of UN policies and how much of the responsibility still lies with the TCCs. It is true that soft law solutions like the Voluntary Compact have certain advantages such as easier negotiation and adaptability over time and changing circumstances. It can also lay the foundation for transitioning towards harder law and for shaping international legal norms (Comstock, 2022). Had the Compact been implemented two decades ago when the issue was still relatively new, it certainly would have been an important stepping stone for creating such a foundation. Unfortunately, the Voluntary Compact came along much too late to serve as a useful accountability mechanism, and it doesn't have much hold over the TCCs. A much stronger framework is needed to ensure accountability.

5.3. Deploying the right peacekeepers

As for reforms that should be considered by the UN, there are steps that can be taken at the pre-deployment level. The UN can take much greater responsibility in pre-deployment processes like vetting and training to make sure that only honorable peacekeepers who will serve with dignity are deployed. As Simic (2015) points out, while most peacekeepers are probably good husbands, partners and non-abusers with no record of misconduct or crimes in their home country, too many of them turn into abusers when placed in a (post) conflict and

military environment. In addition to the current vetting processes that focus on prior history of misconduct, peacekeeping operations would therefore benefit from also looking for preexisting commitments to gender equality. The UN could select mission heads who demonstrate a solid commitment to promoting gender equality and prohibiting SEA, and require them to meet benchmarks related to SEA rules, as suggested by Vojdik (2019).

In the training process, the emphasis should be on reconstructing the role of the military troops in peacekeeping, focusing less on traditional combat values and more on humanitarian goals and skills. What peacekeeping missions need are not aggressive warriors who are trained for combat, but rather peacebuilders who are empathic and peaceful (Simic, 2015; Vojdik, 2019). They should also be taught how to maneuver the systematic flaws that enable perpetrators to get away with SEA, such as corruption and poor reporting and accountability mechanisms, so they are prepared if faced with such situations. From what it seems, the UN could take much more part in ensuring that the correct training is given at the national level. Alternatively, perhaps the training process should be restructured altogether in order to make it more standardized for all troops. Either way, training should seek to form peacekeepers who are interested in building long-term peace and fostering an environment where women are empowered and gender equality is among the main goals.

5.4. An end to impunity

If a lack of accountability is one of the main reasons why SEA keeps happening, ending the culture of impunity is absolutely necessary. While the Voluntary Compact was a significant step in the right direction, much more is needed. Already back in 2005, the Zeid report made recommendations to establish a permanent professional investigative mechanism to investigate serious misconduct, along with several other accountability mechanisms such as on-site courts martial. This was not implemented by the UN. Swedish diplomat and whistleblower Anders Kompass (2020) wrote that “*impunity is the cancer that destroys victims*” and suggested that the UN should create an independent body in charge of accompanying any major humanitarian efforts, which is the first on the spot and the last to leave. It should have enough money and power to ensure accountability for perpetrators through reliable, trustworthy, and transparent investigations and results. He also emphasizes the need for building an organization where no one is afraid to report misconduct, neither victims nor staff.

The Code Blue Campaign by the international advocacy organization AIDS-Free World had a somewhat similar suggestion. Their proposal is to set up an independent, impartial Special

Court Mechanism. That way, victims of SEA would not have to go back to file complaints with the same organization, but rather report to a nearby Special Court Mechanism office and receive an independent, impartial response. It would then be in charge of investigating and prosecuting alleged perpetrators. It would have staff including investigators, lawyers, and support personnel that are all approved by and reporting to Member States and have the legal authority to conduct bona fide criminal investigations. The court would be activated on location when needed, enabling both victims and perpetrators to take part in trials on the spot, with a roster of pre-qualified international judges. Such a mechanism would relieve the host state, TCC, and the UN itself of the burden of handling such matters. Code Blue also suggests a “Victims’ Bill of Rights”, which spells out exactly what victims are entitled to receive (Aids-Free World, n.d.).

Regardless of exactly how it is done, the key is that there needs to be an accountability mechanism which is independent, trustworthy, and holds enough power to properly investigate and prosecute perpetrators. Investigations and trials need to be held right on the spot, right away, and not somewhere far away in the TCC where the victims are no longer involved in the process and the perpetrator might be able to avoid punishment. This would ensure a much fairer trial for all parties. The victims need to know that their case isn’t just put in a drawer somewhere or stuck “pending” in the UN system for a decade while the perpetrator is flying off on a new mission or back to their home country. If the Member States and the United Nations aren’t able to take on the responsibility of handling misconduct, the responsibility should instead be put on an independent mechanism that can relieve them of this burden.

5.5. Naming and Shaming

Anderlini (2017) argues that, in addition to prosecution, naming and shaming is a very powerful tool. The shame and fear that the victims now carry must be shifted to the perpetrators. If peacekeepers knew that their families and communities would be notified of misconduct, and that it might result in termination and no pay, they are much more likely to think twice before committing acts of sexual violence. If the perpetrator values their honor and reputation, such a dent in their career would have quite an impact on their behavior. A ban on redeployment of peacekeepers previously accused of such crimes, which shockingly enough has not been the practice, would likely have a similar effect. While the UN does have a vetting process that all personnel must go through to ensure that they do not have a prior history of misconduct while serving in a UN peace operation, they are only banned from redeployment when the allegation against them is sustained (United Nations, 2019). Of course, the principle of being innocent

until proven guilty applies to peacekeepers as well, but the truth is that false accusations of sexual violence are extremely rare (Newman, 2017), and the number of pending cases in the UN database is very high. Allegations of SEA are simply not taken seriously enough, and investigations are too slow and insufficient, which means that in reality, very few perpetrators are banned from service. This is exactly why an independent mechanism is needed.

Naming and shaming as a strategy applies not only to individual perpetrators, but to Member States as well. No country wants to be associated with citizens who take advantage of the local population during a peacekeeping mission instead of protecting them (Simic, 2009). Publicly naming the home country of perpetrators could therefore put some pressure on TCCs to take the issue more seriously. The United Nations has been reluctant to do so because personnel who have been involved in SEA come from dozens of different countries. In a situation where every peacekeeper counts, the UN can't risk withdrawal of the contributions of a large number of member states (Simic, 2009). From 2015 on, however, information on the nationality of uniformed personnel implicated in allegations of SEA is included in the official UN database for sexual misconduct, in line with the Secretary-General's Special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse report (A/69/779) (United Nations, 2023a). Details are also included on actions taken by the Member States when their nationals are involved in allegations, which makes it much easier for the public to investigate which Member States take the necessary measures and not.

5.6. Gender matters

Finally, many of the underlying causes and issues relating to peacekeeper SEA would be drastically improved by simply including more women in the peacekeeping troops. One need only imagine a peacekeeping troop made up of only women to understand why including more female personnel would be effective. Sadly, viewing women as sexual prey has always been present in military culture, and sexual harassment and violence is not uncommon in militaries around the world (Benedict, 2008). As explained in the first part of the thesis, soldiers are often trained to be aggressive, violent and dominant, while the enemy is often feminized as weak and powerless. This often translates into sexual exploitation and abuse of the local population by military personnel during peacekeeping operations (Vojdik, 2019).

A better balance of women and men in peacekeeping forces would enable more effective peacekeeping and improve overall performance by bringing diverse perspectives and skills that improve decision-making, planning, and operational outcomes. Female presence facilitates

better access to communities, especially women and children, enabling them to gather critical information and provide support in a better way. A better gender balance would also reflect the diversity of the communities they serve in a better way, allowing peacekeepers to build trust and confidence within the community while also increasing transparency and accountability among the forces themselves and reducing levels of sexual abuse (Anderlini, 2017; United Nations, n.d.-b).

Vojdik (2019) explains that gender-based violence and SEA of women in post-conflict are rooted in poverty and unequal power relations between men and women, exacerbated by the social and economic devastation of conflict and further worsened with the arrival of peacekeepers. If the UN has the responsibility to help dismantle the structures that perpetuate this, as Vojdik argues, it is only logical to start with its peacekeepers. More female presence in the peacekeeping troops would also help prevent and reduce conflict by addressing the unique needs of women and providing innovative solutions. Moreover, women peacekeepers serve as powerful role models for women and girls in post-conflict settings, empowering them to advocate for their rights and pursue non-traditional career paths, which is an essential part of improving women's socioeconomic and legal position in the wake of conflict and in the long term (United Nations, n.d.-b; Vojdik, 2019). Additionally, if the United Nations is struggling to find enough peacekeepers, opening the door for more women might just be the right step.

Despite all of these benefits, women often find themselves edged out and excluded instead. In 2021, only 7,8% of all uniformed military, police, justice and corrections personnel in field missions were women. The majority of them were deployed as experts and staff officers, not as military troops (United Nations, n.d.-b). While this is an increase from only 1% in 1993, it is still not enough. Currently, women are prioritized for individual staff positions in peacekeeping operations by the UN, and Member States are requested to nominate a certain percentage of female staff per category. Far from all of them reach that goal, however (United Nations, n.d.-b). Anderlini (2017) believes that the low number of women is due to the fact that, in many Member States, soldiers and police officers are paid higher salaries on UN missions than domestically, so the ones who benefit are unwilling to give up their slots. If that is the case, it would be useful to create incentives for the TCCs to increase the percentage of women, and maybe even pay a bonus for each female officer deployed. Anderlini also recommends setting up programs and better training specifically for women who are interested in becoming peacekeepers, since there is often nowhere for them to enlist, or they are rejected at the national level. Luckily, changes are slowly being made in the right direction, but it needs to happen much faster.

It is true that this approach has received criticism in the past. Some see it as a quick fix and argue that simply having more women there won't set the perpetrators straight. The men will be the same while the burden of improving the situation will be on the women. Or worse, female peacekeepers will become the victims themselves. Trones (2023) researched this particular topic by looking at data related to the percentage of female peacekeepers per sending country and the percentage of allegations per 1000 peacekeepers from that country. The data showed a very weak positive correlation between the number of female peacekeepers and the number of SEA allegations, demonstrating no evidence of fewer allegations among troops with more women. However, as Trones points out, there is no significant statistical relation, so these numbers don't necessarily say much about whether the presence of women determines anything or not. Apart from that, since the overall percentage of female peacekeepers is still so low, it is too early to draw any conclusions. It is quite likely that a much higher number of women is needed before we can start to see any real effects. Also, this data is very difficult to work with statistically due to different types of variables. For instance, more female presence might mean more trust in the UN among the local population, leading to more reported cases of SEA because victims are less afraid to report, but not necessarily because it is happening more. Finally, in order to analyze this in a reliable way, it would be much more interesting to look at the percentage of women per mission in relation to allegations of SEA rather than per sending country. Unfortunately, those numbers are not made available by the UN per today (Trones, 2023). If they were, it would provide the opportunity for much more comprehensive case studies.

6. Conclusion

Officially, there have been about 2,000 reports of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers. The sad reality, however, is that SEA is likely to be much more common than what we realize. Many victims don't report misconduct because they are afraid or simply can't, and they seem to have more trust in journalists than in the United Nations. Since so many cases go unreported, the credibility of the statistics is limited, making it difficult to conduct research. However, the bottom line is that we know that SEA among peacekeepers is happening, and it cannot be accepted any longer. It is time to make some changes.

The attempts made by the UN to improve the situation thus far have mainly been focused on mitigating the consequences of the issue rather than addressing the root causes behind it. In other words, the symptoms are treated but not the disease. While some steps have focused on prevention by including improved standards of conduct and training, soft law solutions like the Voluntary Compact and the establishment of the Trust Fund for victims of SEA are more remedial actions than preventative measures. If SEA is to be prevented, it is necessary to employ strategies that focus on the underlying causes, starting with screening and training, as well as significantly more commitment to gender equality. Vetting processes should look at attitudes towards gender and commitment to peace in addition to previous misconduct. Training should focus on forming peacebuilders, not soldiers. If the troop-contributing countries are not using the right approach, the UN must step up to ensure that all peacekeepers receive training centered around peace instead of combat.

The United Nations also needs to do more to ensure accountability. Prevention is key, and an integrated culture of impunity is likely to be one of the main reasons behind why certain peacekeepers commit actions of SEA. An end to this impunity is thus an essential part of prevention. Since most TCCs are assumingly very reluctant to give up the immunity agreements that protect their nationals from being prosecuted on mission, the UN must find a way to work around that. And since very few of the perpetrators involved in allegations of SEA are ultimately prosecuted at national level, the UN should seriously consider setting up a brand-new accountability mechanism. It should be transparent and trustworthy, and have enough power to hold proper investigations and trials. On-spot trials would ensure that victims and witnesses are properly heard, which is beneficial both for them and for the alleged perpetrator. It would also ensure that reports aren't stuck pending investigation for years in the UN system. The faith of the victims cannot rely on the nationality of their abuser as long as all peacekeepers serve under the same UN flag.

In addition to that, more needs to be done for the victims. The UN Trust Fund is a good start. However, it is a rather small fund, only representing a small fraction of the UN budget. So far, it has only received donations from 24 Member States (Comstock, 2022). Also, considering the low number of sustained allegations, there are many victims of SEA that will never benefit from this fund or receive any type of report from the UN. That is another reason why a transparent investigative and accountability mechanism is needed. That way, victims will have a safe place to report and receive the help they deserve, be it physical, psychological, or monetary.

Finally, the long-term goal should always be to eliminate gender inequality and empower women. That applies both within the peacekeeping troops as well as in the communities where they are stationed. Poverty, unequal power relations, and gender inequality are among the root causes behind SEA, especially in conflict situations. The indicators of SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) adapted to the local context would provide a good measurement for that. Setting up programs and working with local NGOs that focus on women is one way of empowering the local female population. Including many more women in peacekeeping troops is another way, which can be sped up by creating incentives for the TCCs to increase the percentage of women, among other things.

It is important to remember that most UN peacekeepers are honorable people with good intentions and that peacekeeping operations are essential to maintaining international peace and security. However, the bad apples have caused a giant dent in the reputation of the UN and its peacekeeping missions, not to mention the consequences for the victims and local communities. Reform is needed, for the good of the organization, the local populations, and the peacekeepers themselves. It is finally time for the UN to kill the cancer in its system and live up to its proclaimed stance of Zero-tolerance.

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