

Reducing Sexual Abuse and Exploitation in UN Peacekeeping Missions: Reforming Data Collection to Inform Action

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Sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by United Nations (UN) peacekeepers is a critical issue. The UN has had a zero-tolerance policy in place since 2003 and has made data on SEA allegations in peace operations publicly available since 2007. This data reveals that peacekeeping missions with civilian-protection mandates account for over 95 percent of reported allegations, while missions without such mandates account for under 5 percent. However, gaps and inconsistencies in data collection, reporting, and interpretation make it difficult to draw conclusions from the data alone. We need substantial context and case-specific knowledge to fully interpret the reported numbers. This policy brief makes recommendations to the UN on how to improve data collection and clarify reporting mechanisms, and calls for extensive external investigation to explain the variation in reported cases of SEA.

Introduction

To reach the goal of zero tolerance for sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), in 2006 the United Nations (UN) began keeping records and tracking data on allegations in peace operations. Since July 2008, the Department of Field Support's conduct and discipline unit has managed a confidential misconduct tracking system (MTS), "a global, restricted-access database for all allegations of misconduct." They have made the data collected since 2007 publicly available.¹



Related research is available at giwps.georgetown.edu.

This tracking is important because it is used by the UN to inform policy and progress toward zero tolerance.² However, the data is difficult to parse, inconsistent, and incomplete.³ The data suggests that peacekeeping operations with a protection of civilians (PoC) mandate report far more allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation than operations without this mandate. Here, we discuss some significant problems with the data—which make interpretation of this finding difficult and potentially misleading—by building on the work of scholars, journalists, and practitioners who have attempted to document SEA in peace operations. We conclude with some recommendations to improve data collection. True policy change is impossible without a clear sense of—and accountability for—the problem. Reducing the incidence of SEA in peace operations rests at least in part on improving data collection.

Systematic Differences between Mandate Types

Since 1999, the UN Security Council (UNSC) has mandated every multidimensional UN peacekeeping operation to use force in defense of civilians under Chapter VII of the UN Charter; today, most peacekeepers operate under these PoC mandates. A smaller number of peacekeeping missions do not have the directive to use force in defense of civilians under threat of violence; reflecting usual terminology, we refer to these missions as ‘interpositional’ to reflect their roles overseeing the implementation of peace agreements between warring factions.⁴

PoC mandates can be very difficult to fulfill.⁵ Studies suggest that prospects are better when there is local-level engagement by peacekeepers—local-level engagement helps facilitate conflict resolution and better outcomes for the civilian population.⁶ However, local-level engagement is uniquely challenging if peacekeepers arrive with reputations for sexual and human-rights abuse.⁷

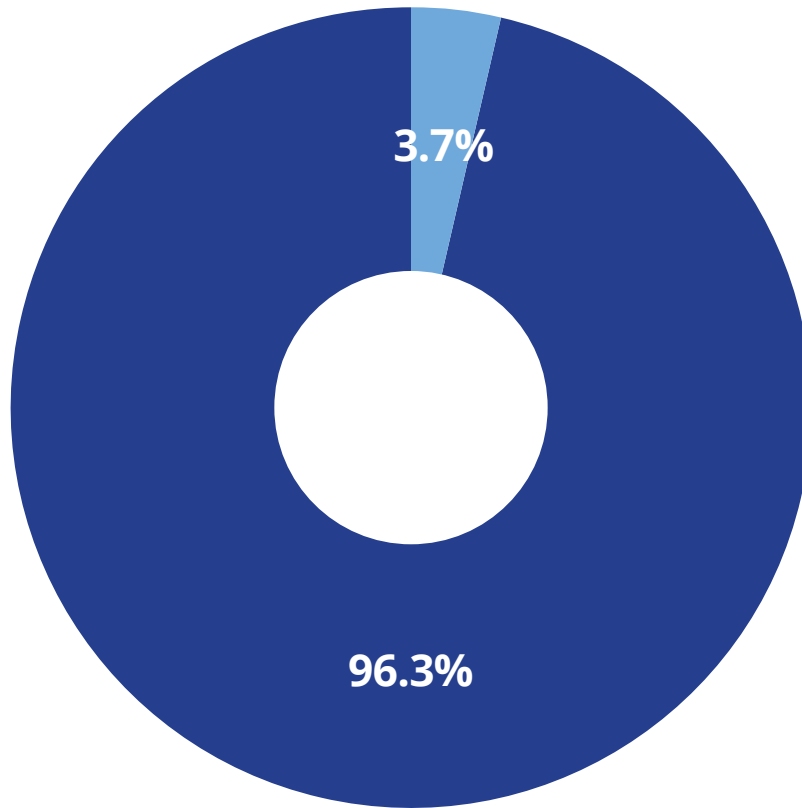
We drew on the UN’s data and other sources to look at the relationship between PoC mandates and SEA allegations.⁸ In the decade for which we have data, there are records for 30 unique missions, with 886 allegations in total. More than 96 percent of peacekeepers are authorized under PoC mandates today, but historically there have been more interpositional missions.⁹ Of 30 unique

missions operating between 2007 and 2017, 15 missions have PoC mandates and 15 have interpositional mandates. At the same time, the 15 missions with PoC mandates together account for a total of 853 allegations, or 96.3 percent of the recorded allegations. The 15 missions with interpositional mandates have 33 allegations, or 3.7 percent. Figure 1 illustrates this disparity.



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FIGURE 1:
Percentage of SEA Allegations
by Mandate Type



■ 15 Missions with Civilian Protection Mandates

■ 15 Missions with Interpositional Mandates

SOURCE:

“Table of Allegations,” Conduct in UN Field Missions, United Nations, <https://conduct.unmissions.org/table-of-allegations>

Lise Morjé Howard and Anjali Kaushlesh Dayal, “The use of force in UN peacekeeping,” *International Organization* 72, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 71-103.

This is a striking difference, but we cannot draw any clear conclusions because, as noted below, new procedures could cause reported rates to vary, mission capacity could affect the number of allegations reported, or results could reveal real differences in the rates of SEA by peacekeepers in missions with PoC mandates. There is also significant variation in numbers of reported SEA allegations within mandate type. Determining what accounts for these very different outcomes across and within kinds of missions would require extensive and context-specific investigations.

It is important to know whether missions in charge of protecting civilians under threat of violence actually are associated with higher rates of sexual abuse and exploitation, or if they are merely more equipped to process allegations. These are important considerations as the UN considers how it implements its policy of zero tolerance.

Shortcomings in the Data

In a working paper, we highlight seven hypotheses that may help explain the discrepancy in the number of reported cases of SEA between peacekeeping missions with PoC mandates and those without. These hypotheses include variation in the size, context, and leadership of a mission. However, the explanation for the variance most likely comes from problems with data. The UN's data suffers from both issues specific to the UN's mode of collection and issues more general to data about gender-based violence: issues of reporting, collection, and interpretability.

- **Reporting**

External evidence indicates that the UN's data presents an incomplete account of SEA by peacekeepers. Both survey and interview evidence indicates that the actual incidence of SEA exceeds the reported rate, particularly where perpetrators are part of powerful organizations.¹⁰ Drawing on a 2012 survey conducted in Liberia, for example, scholars estimated "that more than half of eighteen- to thirty-year-old women in greater Monrovia have engaged in transactional sex and that most of them (more than three-quarters, or about 58,000 women) have done so with UN personnel, typically in exchange for money."¹¹ As legal scholar Kate Grady writes, if anything approximating that number

of "women in Monrovia have had transactional sex with UN personnel in the period up to 2012, then it seems unlikely that the accurate number of cases of sexual exploitation and abuse involving peacekeeping personnel globally during the period 2003–2012 was the 1,367 that appear in the UN's official reports."¹²



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A recent PBS *Frontline* investigation in both the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic located victims of SEA by peacekeepers who had not reported their cases to the UN.¹³ An independent review commissioned by the UN of its actions surrounding allegations of SEA by French soldiers in the Central African Republic also noted that documented cases were likely emblematic of patterns of abusive behavior, with larger numbers of victims than reported.¹⁴ Accordingly, the UN's reported numbers of 89 cases over five years in the Central African Republic are likely to underestimate the actual prevalence of SEA there.

- **Collection**

The UN attempts to guarantee that all missions follow uniform processes for reporting and managing complaints of misconduct, including SEA. The Secretariat reviews complaints from each mission through the MTS. All reports of potential misconduct are assessed to determine whether the alleged acts would constitute a breach of the UN Standards of Conduct. If so, the allegation is referred for investigation. Subsequently, the Office of Internal Oversight Services separates allegations into two categories for investigation according to the degree of risk the allegation poses to the UN.¹⁵

Despite this effort at standardization, the large number of potential actors involved in producing the data is still notable: incidents of SEA can be reported to the focal point, to the conduct



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and discipline teams, directly to military contingents, or to the special representative of the secretary-general, among others.¹⁶ This multiplicity of actors introduces significant variation across missions at the initial point of reporting and introduces substantial uncertainty about what the numbers of allegations actually represent. For example, the data will sometimes classify multiple instances of SEA or multiple victims as a single allegation, and “it seems...the UN is measuring the

number of communications it receives about incidents of sexual exploitation and abuse....Since one allegation may represent more than one victim and/or more than one perpetrator, the data under-reports the scale of the phenomenon.”¹⁷

There is also significant variation across time within the data. Even information as basic as what constitutes a case has taken years to develop and clarify.¹⁸ The organizations and offices contributing data and analysis to each annual update have themselves changed,¹⁹ resulting in little year-to-year stability to the data. Again, this makes it difficult to assess what changes in the data actually mean.²⁰ One example of data fluctuation across time is the case of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). In the four years since the mission began in 2014, reported cases of SEA have fluctuated from zero to 22 to 52 to 15.²¹ These numbers alone tell us nothing about what may have caused the increase or decrease in reported cases. Reported numbers require substantial context and case-specific knowledge to fully interpret.

- **Interpretation**

Finally, it is hard to interpret levels and trends in reported cases. Better procedures for reporting could generate an increase in reported cases relative to a baseline or, depending on the nature of local implementation, could actually depress reporting rates.²² When reporting procedures improve, it is not uncommon for the reported incidence of SEA to go up—but, accordingly, variation in the reported incidence of SEA may tell us comparatively little about the actual incidence of SEA.

Taken together, both for reasons related to the nature of SEA and because of issues related the UN's internal practices, these problems make it very difficult to evaluate the UN's data on SEA. The reported rates and their direction of change do not lend themselves to conclusions about the nature of SEA in peace operations. This is clearly problematic, given the necessity of combatting SEA and evaluating progress towards the UN's zero-tolerance goal.

Policy Recommendations

The UN Secretariat is committed to addressing sexual abuse and exploitation in peace operations. Important new developments include the appointment of Jane Connors as the first victims' rights advocate for the UN in August 2017,²³ and the May 2018 report and toolkit from the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), titled "Serving with pride: Key initiatives to prevent and address misconduct."²⁴ However, neither of these measures addresses reforming data-collection or reporting mechanisms.

Our review points to five recommendations for the UN Secretariat. Each step is important for ensuring the protection of people who are among the world's most vulnerable, as well as ensuring the UN can effectively respond to SEA in peace operations.

- **Establish consistent data-collection processes across missions and time.**

It is vital for the Secretariat to design and establish a clear, well-defined data-collection strategy that is applicable across all missions, and then to leave that strategy in place for multiple years.

- **Distinguish between sexual abuse and sexual exploitation.**

Data collection, reporting, and interpretation should distinguish more clearly and systematically between sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. Use of the umbrella term SEA conflates multiple issues influenced by context and country. Sexual abuse (sadistic, violent attack) and sexual exploitation (transactional sex) may be the result of very different behaviors and motivations, in turn requiring different types of prevention strategies, policy solutions, and punishment measures.²⁵ The recent Mission Justice campaign, supported by a group of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), as well as the Sri Lankan, UK, and Finnish missions to the UN, has made a similar call to separate rape by peacekeepers into its own category of offense, indicating broad support for this kind of move.²⁶

 **Investigate specific missions more deeply.**

In order to interpret the data provided in the MTS, scholars and analysts should undertake extensive and context-specific case studies. Without full contextual interpretation, reported numbers, their fluctuations, and their comparisons are ambiguous at best and misleading at worst.

 **Conduct external evaluations.**

When UN troops are accused of wrongdoing, the UN should not function as the accused, the lead investigator, and the judge all at once—even if there are geographic and bureaucratic separations between various parts of the UN system. Allowing external actors to verify and assist in reporting and investigations would eventually strengthen both what we know about SEA and the UN's ability to respond to these violations. This could take the form of requesting assistance from law firms or renowned NGOs, or a UNSC mandate given to an independent team of experts.

 **Increase accountability.**

Troop-contributing countries should work alongside DPKO and the Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate at the UN to strengthen internal guidelines that allow for the prosecution of perpetrators of SEA. National capitals should subsequently prosecute perpetrators of SEA in UN peacekeeping missions to the fullest extent of the law.

Together, these reforms in data collection, reporting, and investigation would enable a more holistic understanding of the nature and incidence of SEA in UN peacekeeping missions. Only then can we develop a true understanding of how SEA changes over time and how reported rates respond to different policy interventions.

Notes

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- ² Gabrielle Simm, *Sex in Peace Operations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013; Kate Grady, "Sex, Statistics, Peacekeepers and Power: UN Data on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and the Quest for Legal Reform," *Modern Law Review* 79, no. 6 (2016): 931-960.
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- ⁴ Lise Morjé Howard and Anjail K. Dayal, "The use of Force in UN Peacekeeping," *International Organization* 72, no. 1 (December, 2017): 71-103.
- ⁵ Victoria K. Holt and Tobias C. Berkman, *The Impossible Mandate? Military Preparedness, the Responsibility to Protect, and Modern Peace Operations*, Washington, DC: Henry L. Stimson Center, 2006.
- ⁶ Andrea Ruggeri, Han Dorussen, and Theodora-Ismene Gizelis, "Winning the Peace Locally: UN Peacekeeping and Local Conflict," *International Organization* 71, no. 1 (November, 2016): 163-185; Sarah B. K. von Billerbeck, *Whose Peace? Local Ownership and United Nations Peacekeeping*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017; Séverine Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- ⁷ Nimmi Gowrinathan and Kate Cronin-Furman, "UN Peacekeepers: Keeping the Peace Or Preventing it?," *Al Jazeera*, May 2, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/04/peacekeepers-keeping-peace-preventing-170430102118379.html>; Mark Townsend, "Sri Lanka 'War Criminals' Deployed as UN Peacekeepers," *The Guardian*, July 21, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/21/sri-lanka-war-criminals-un-peace-keeping-missions-darfur-mali-south-sudan>.
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- ¹² Grady, "Sex, Statistics, Peacekeepers and Power: UN Data on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and the Quest for Legal Reform," 948-949.
- ¹³ Leila Miller, "How we found unreported claims of UN peacekeeper abuse," *PBS Frontline*, July 24 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/how-we-found-unreported-claims-of-un-peacekeeper-abuse/>.
- ¹⁴ Marie Deschamps, Hassan B. Jallow, and Yasmin Sooka, *Taking action on sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers*, (New York, NY: United Nations, 2015) 37, <http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/centafricrepub/Independent-Review-Report.pdf>.
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- ¹⁶ Grady, "Sex, Statistics, Peacekeepers and Power: UN Data on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and the Quest for Legal Reform," 933.
- ¹⁷ Grady, "Sex, Statistics, Peacekeepers and Power: UN Data on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and the Quest for Legal Reform," 936.
- ¹⁸ Grady, "Sex, Statistics, Peacekeepers and Power: UN Data on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and the Quest for Legal Reform," 936.
- ¹⁹ Grady, "Sex, Statistics, Peacekeepers and Power: UN Data on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and the Quest for Legal Reform," 937.
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