

Impunity and Institutional Failure: Assessing Accountability Gaps in UN Peacekeeper Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) in Africa

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Abstract

United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions, deployed to protect civilians and restore stability, have faced serious allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), particularly in African nations like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan, and the Central African Republic. Alarming, SEA has occurred within gender-focused structures such as the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) program and Gender Advisory Units, designed to advance gender equality under UN frameworks like Resolution 1325. This paper examines how systemic failures, patriarchal norms, and militarized masculinities enable SEA impunity, undermining the UN's Zero Tolerance Policy. Using Cynthia Enloe's feminist framework, it highlights the paradox of gender-focused peacekeeping initiatives inadvertently facilitating exploitation.

Keywords: Impunity, Accountability, SEA, Vulnerability, Gender, Peacekeepers, Paradox, Militarized masculinity

Divided into three sections, the Present research paper explores:

- 1. The Paradox of SEA in UN Peacekeeping**— This section of the present research paper will examine how peacekeeping missions have harmed vulnerable populations in Africa.
- 2. Institutional Failures, Accountability Gaps and the Patriarchal Roots of Impunity** – This section will explore Factors sustaining SEA within gender-focused structures through Cynthia Enloe's perspective on militarized masculinity, structural silencing, and broader implications of SEA.
- 3. Concluding Remarks** – This section of the present paper will suggest systemic reforms to address the institutional failure enabling SEA.

1. Paradox of SEA in UN peacekeeping forces in Africa

In African UN peacekeeping missions, militarized masculinity has often manifested in exploitative behaviour by peacekeepers, thereby exposing significant systemic failures. These missions, designed to stabilize war-torn regions and to protect civilians, have instead contributed to worsening the vulnerabilities of already traumatized communities, especially women. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan, and CAR are among the worst-affected regions of Africa where peacekeeping interventions were marred by pervasive SEA. Regions like the DRC and CAR—already destabilized by years of conflict, poverty, displacement, and corruption—have become breeding grounds for SEA. Particularly in the DRC, peacekeepers were involved in building a thriving sex economy. Women in these areas have faced double

victimization: first, through direct abuse, and second, through cultural and institutional silencing. The normalization of sexual violence in conflict zones is evident; the DRC has been labelled the "rape capital of the world," and women and girls often engaged in "survival sex" with peacekeepers in exchange for food and basic aid. Underscoring how conflict-related violence has normalized rape and sexual exploitation by various actors, including civilian perpetrators, humanitarian workers, and UN peacekeepers. Most women and girls in the DRC who engaged in sexual relations with peacekeepers—whether coerced or consensual—were driven by extreme poverty. Women engaged in "survival sex" with peacekeepers for food, driven by poverty and post-colonial marginalization. Between 2015 and 2023, over 350 SEA allegations were reported in MONUSCO alone, highlighting the persistence of these issues.¹ In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), allegations emerged during the Ebola outbreak that humanitarian workers, tasked with aiding the community, exploited women and girls by demanding sexual favors in exchange for low-level jobs. Following victim testimonies in 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) launched an investigation in 2020, culminating in an Independent Commission report in 2021. The report identified at least 83 alleged perpetrators, including both local and international staff, though the true scale of abuse is likely underreported due to survivors' reluctance to come forward. In 2017, the UN's Conduct and Discipline Unit documented 54 SEA cases in the DRC.² During the Ebola outbreak, even humanitarian workers allegedly coerced women into sexual acts in exchange for employment, resulting in unwanted pregnancies, forced abortions, and lifelong trauma³. Statistics also show that approximately 1.69 -1.80 million women in DRC reported lifetime rape, with 407,397-433,785 raped in the 12 months before 2007 (highlighted by the Peterman report)⁴. Approximately 1.8 million women in the DRC have reported experiencing rape in their lifetime, with around 400,000 reported cases in a single year⁵. Moreover, peacekeeper relationships—sometimes seen as an escape from poverty—have only entrenched further economic dependence, particularly when children are born from these exploitative encounters. In 2023 alone, eight MONUSCO peacekeepers were accused of sexual misconduct, adding to the 224 documented cases between 2010–2021.⁶

Alone Democratic Republic of Congo alone has faced significant levels of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by peacekeepers, accounting for over a third of all formal SEA allegations across global peacekeeping missions. Despite the UN's zero-tolerance policy and discouragement of sexual relations between peacekeepers and local communities, SEA remains pervasive, raising doubts about the policy's effectiveness. While some locals view relationships with peacekeepers as a potential escape from poverty, these interactions often deepen poverty cycles, particularly when children are involved. In Central African Republic, peacekeepers abused their authority and coerced women living in Central African Republic for

¹<https://theconversation.com/circles-of-impunity-why-sexual-violence-by-humanitarians-and-peacekeepers-keeps-happening-169404> accessed on 22.04.25

² West, K., Bartels, S., & Blackwell, A. (2021). Sexual exploitation and abuse by international peacekeepers: Understanding variation in UN missions. *BMJ Global Health*, 6(9), e005980
<https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2021-0059> accessed on 22.04.2025

³ UNICEF, "Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Equateur province: Community -Based Complaint Mechanisms" 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/documents/sea-Equateur-province> accessed on 22.04.25

⁴<https://theconversation.com/circles-of-impunity-why-sexual-violence-by-humanitarians-and-peacekeepers-keeps-happening-169404> accessed on 22.04.25

⁵ United Nations Conduct and Discipline Unit. (2023). Sexual exploitation and abuse: Statistics. Retrieved on 22.04.2025

⁶ Al Jazeera. (2022). "UN aid workers accused of sexual abuse in South Sudan's Malakal camp."

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/15/un-workers-accused-of-sexual-abuse-in-south-sudan-camp> accessed on 22.04.25

“transactional sex” for food or security.⁷ Just like Central African Republic SEA cases in South Sudan also involves UN personnels, statistical data shows that in 2020 there were 10 allegations of SEA reported in South Sudan, and 2021 the number decreased to 8 allegations and in 2022 there were 6 allegations recorded, in 2022, an investigative report highlighted allegations of sexual abuse by aid worker in UN-led camp in Malakal, South Sudan. This case exemplifies the ongoing challenges in preventing SEA and emphasizes the need for stronger oversight.⁸

This paradox, where peacekeeping initiatives intended to protect women become sites of abuse, demands critical feminist analysis.

2. Institutional Failures, Accountability Gaps and the patriarchal roots of impunity

Gender-focused frameworks such as the WPS program and gender advisory units were created to promote gender equality under UN Security Council Resolution 1325. However, these structures have themselves become sites of SEA due to ingrained patriarchal norms, accountability gaps, and institutional inertia. Cynthia Enloe, in her book *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, emphasizes how hyper-masculinized institutions normalize exploitation and suppress women's voices to maintain male-dominated authority.⁹ UN peacekeeping missions often function under a culture of “structured silence”—a deliberate suppression of women’s experiences to uphold mission legitimacy. For example, MONUSCO suppressed the 2018 Bakau allegations to avoid reputational damage. Enloe’s idea of structured silence is manifest in the institutional erasure of survivors’ testimonies and the prioritization of mission goals over justice. Structural silence conceptualized by Enloe refers to the deliberate and systemic suppression of women’s experience, voices and harm within patriarchal structures to maintain their operational continuity and legitimacy. In UN peacekeeping structural silence operates through institutional mechanisms that suppress SEA reports (e.g., WPS program, Gender advisory units), structural silence manifest as the institutional erasure of survivors’ testimonies, the dismissal of allegations, and prioritization of missions reputation over justice, it’s shielding perpetrators, perpetuating impunity and exacerbating the double victimization of women – first through abuse and then through exclusion from accountability processes. Enloe points out in her book that “Silence is not merely gaps; they are structured by those in power to sustain their dominance, rendering certain experience’s especially women’s, invisible”¹⁰.

Examples of structural silencing

- In 2018, several Congolese women in Bukavu came forward with detailed accounts of SEA by UN peacekeepers. These allegations, however, were never formally acknowledged in MONUSCO’s reports. Mission leadership reportedly downplayed the seriousness of the accusations, arguing that formal action might compromise operational cohesion. This suppression demonstrates Enloe’s theory of “structured silence,” where institutions prioritize male-dominated authority and mission reputation over survivor justice. It also illustrates how bureaucratic decisions serve to render women’s traumatic experiences invisible.

⁷ <https://phr.org/news/massive-influx-of-conflict-related-sexual-violence-in-eastern-democratic-republic-of-the-congo-drc-phr-report/> accessed on 22.04.2025

⁸ <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/longform/2022/9/22/sex-abuse-allegations-against-aid-workers-in-south-sudan-un-camp> accessed on 23.04.25

¹⁰ Enloe, C. (2014). *Bananas, beaches and bases: Making feminist sense of international politics* (2nd ed.). University of California press, P.123

¹⁰ *ibid*; P.133

- In UNIMISS, only one woman in Equateur province knew the reporting mechanism in 2021, and in 2022, Malakal camp abuses were underreported to avoid scrutiny. The 2022 investigative report revealed that while abuse was widespread, formal complaints were scarce due to fear of retaliation, stigma, and a lack of safe reporting mechanisms. The women's socio-economic dependency on the camp infrastructure made them vulnerable and discouraged reporting, exemplifying how institutional silence perpetuates impunity.¹¹
- In MINUSCA, 2015 survivors' reports to SEA in WPS programs were suppressed, with mission leadership prioritizing operational continuity. In CAR, WPS programs intended to support women's empowerment became avenues for abuse. Survivors who reported SEA in these programs were ignored by mission leadership. Their complaints were dismissed under the justification that escalating such issues could damage diplomatic relations and mission continuity. The deliberate suppression of these testimonies is a case of structured silence, where protecting institutional image overrides the pursuit of justice.¹²

Such suppression compounds survivors' suffering, robbing them of justice and subjecting them to double victimization. Gender advisory units, ostensibly established to support women, often falter in addressing SEA reports, constrained by patriarchal hierarchies that dominate mission structures. Cynthia Enloe's framework on the "invisibility of women's experiences" exposes how these units inadvertently uphold systemic silence, undermining their very purpose and perpetuating harm.¹³ The paradox of UN peacekeeping's gender-focused initiatives lies in their deviation from their intended purpose. Rather than safeguarding and empowering survivors of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA), these programs often prioritize preserving the mission's reputation, perpetuating impunity, and compromising the credibility of Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) frameworks. There are some examples mentioned below which will justify this statement: -

- **MONUSCO (2017):** Gender engagement teams dismissed 54 SEA allegations. Gender engagement teams within MONUSCO received reports from multiple survivors alleging coercion and exploitation by peacekeepers. Instead of pursuing investigations, the male-dominated leadership dismissed 54 cases on procedural grounds, often citing "lack of evidence" or questioning the survivors' credibility. This not only disempowered victims but also entrenched institutional bias that invalidated women's experiences.¹⁴
- **MINUSCA (2015–2016):** Gender units failed to escalate over 120 + SEA allegations, prioritizing mission goals over survivor needs. Despite the volume of complaints, gender units failed to escalate these reports. Investigations were either delayed indefinitely or quietly closed. The failure was

¹¹ UNICEF. (2021). Sexual Exploitation and abuse in Equateur province: Community based complaint mechanism.

<https://www.unicef.org/documents/sea-equateur-province> (P.3) accessed on 23.04.2025

¹² United Nations, "Report of the Secretary-General on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence," 2016, <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/report-of-the-secretary-general-on-conflict-related-sexual-violence-2016.pdf>. Accessed on 24.04.25

¹³ Enloe, C. (2004). The curious feminist: Searching for women in a new age of empire. University of California Press (p. 56).

¹⁴ United Nations Conduct and Discipline Unit. (2023). Sexual exploitation and abuse: Statistics. Retrieved April 22, 2025, from <https://conduct.unmissions.org/sea-statistics> accessed on 24.04.25

attributed to inadequate staff, insufficient training, and a systemic preference for maintaining the mission's external image over addressing internal misconduct¹⁵

Another reason that sustains SEA in African Peacekeeping missions is the Mechanism of Intersectional Silencing.

Mechanisms of Intersectional silencing- African women, bearing the intersecting burdens of race, poverty, and post-colonial marginalization, endure systemic silencing within these structures. Their voices are suppressed and their claims deprioritized, exacerbating injustice. Cynthia Enloe's feminist perspective elucidates how colonial legacies perpetuate this invisibility, amplifying the patriarchal norms that shield perpetrators and undermine survivor advocacy.

- **Race and post-coloniality**

African women's racialized identities and histories of post-colonial oppression led to their SEA (Sexual Exploitation and Abuse) claims being deprioritized in Western-dominated UN systems.

- **Example:** In MONUSCO (2017), Congolese women reported 54 SEA allegations within WPS programs. However, their claims were ignored due to their Black, African identities being undervalued within UN hierarchies. Black Congolese women faced additional challenges due to racial biases inherent in the UN's hierarchical structure. Their voices were often considered less credible or exaggerated due to prevailing stereotypes. These women were frequently dismissed as opportunists or emotionally unstable, reflecting how colonial mindsets still shape institutional responses.¹⁶ Enloe's intersectionality perspective demonstrates how colonial legacies render African women as "less credible" victims.

- **Poverty and Displacement**

Economic vulnerability and forced displacement heighten the risk of SEA while simultaneously silencing victims. Displacement and poverty create circumstances where survivors of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) face stigma and fear, discouraging them from reporting their experiences.

- **MONUSCO (2022–2023):** Among 1.1 million displaced Congolese women, poverty-driven stigma and concerns about losing access to aid led 75% of survivors to refrain from reporting SEA cases within Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) programs. Despite visible signs of abuse, 75% of victims chose not to report due to fears of losing aid benefits and facing community rejection. UN gender units were understaffed and failed to create safe, anonymous channels for reporting, deepening the silence.¹⁷
- **UNMISS (2022):** Economic challenges in South Sudan contributed to the underreporting of abuses in Malakal camps, with survivors facing significant obstacles tied to poverty. Displaced women subjected to SEA hesitated to come forward because doing so might jeopardize their access to food and shelter provided by the camp. Many believed that complaints would lead to their expulsion or isolation. The absence of financial independence, combined with systemic indifference, kept these survivors trapped in cycles of abuse. (Al Jazeera, 2022).

Impact: These conditions perpetuate silence and injustice, preventing survivors from seeking accountability while reinforcing structural inequalities in WPS initiatives.

¹⁵ United Nations. (2016). Report of the Secretary-General on conflict-related sexual violence. <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/report-of-the-secretary-general-on-conflict-related-sexual-violence-2016.pdf> accessed on 23.04.25

¹⁶ United Nations Conduct and Discipline Unit, "Sexual Exploitation and Abuse: Statistics," accessed April 22, 2025, <https://conduct.unmissions.org/sea-statistics>. Accessed on 23.04.25

¹⁷ CARE, "Rapid Gender Analysis: North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo," 2023, <https://www.care.org/our-impact/gender-in-emergencies/rapid-gender-analysis/north-kivu-drc-2023>. Accessed on 24.04.2025

- **Social Stigma as a Barrier to Reporting SEA**

Community ostracism significantly contributes to the silencing of survivors of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA).

- **MONUSCO:** In this mission, Congolese women who endured SEA were stigmatized with the label “peacekeeper wives,” leading to severe social exclusion. Among child victims, 65% faced rejection by their families, further suppressing their ability to report abuse (CARE, 2023, p. 5). This stigmatization led to social ostracism, damaged marriage prospects, and emotional trauma. In cases involving children, 65% of the families rejected babies born from these interactions. The social stigma not only harmed the survivors but also actively discouraged future reporting, enabling perpetrators to continue unpunished.

Impact: Social stigma compounds survivors’ trauma, creating an environment that discourages reporting and perpetuates structural neglect of their experiences

- **Weak Oversight and training gaps**

Gender advisory units frequently lack adequate resources to address intersectional vulnerabilities, leaving survivors unsupported.

- **Example:** In MINUSCA, gender units failed to escalate SEA allegations reported between 2015 and 2016 due to insufficient capacity and prioritization. Gender advisory units lacked both logistical resources and trained staff to handle the surge of SEA complaints. Many survivors were redirected to ill-equipped local NGOs or never received follow-ups. The failure to escalate reports reflected a structural lack of preparedness and commitment, leaving survivors feeling abandoned.¹⁸

Inadequate training within peacekeeping programs often overlooks critical issues such as race and poverty, leaving personnel ill-equipped to protect marginalized women. As Cynthia Enloe's analysis highlights, the lack of intersectional perspectives in training exacerbates the silencing of vulnerable groups within peacekeeping environments. This structural oversight perpetuates the systemic neglect of survivors, enabling ongoing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) and eroding the credibility of Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) initiatives.

Challenges in the enforcement of the zero-tolerance policy of the UN

While the zero-tolerance policy sets clear guidelines, enforcement remains a major hurdle. Under status-of-force agreements, Troop-Contributing Countries (TCCs) hold criminal jurisdiction over their military personnel in host nations. This makes it difficult for victims to access justice, as TCCs often fail to investigate or prosecute SEA cases, and Limited accountability mechanisms allow perpetrators to act without facing legal consequences, perpetuating SEA within peacekeeping missions.¹⁹ On the side of the victim who are under the situation of double marginalization often feel shameful even to report because, silence denies survivors justice, with 75% non-reporting in MONUSCO and stigma labelling Congolese women ‘peacekeepers wives’ which often perpetuates impunity and sidelines UN zero Tolerance policy and motivates ill intentional peacekeepers and voluntaries to indulge in SEA of African women.

¹⁸ United Nations, “Report of the Secretary-General on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence,” 2016, <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/report-of-the-secretary-general-on-conflict-related-sexual-violence-2016.pdf>. Accessed on 24.04.25

¹⁹ <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2022/05/02/beyond-repatriation-combating-peacekeeper-sexual-abuse-and-exploitation/> accessed on 24.04.2025

Accountability Gaps in Addressing SEA Cases:

TCC Deference

Troop-Contributing Countries (TCCs) often refuse to prosecute perpetrators, reinforcing structural silence within UN missions. Former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon described peacekeeper abuse as a “cancer” within the UN system, emphasizing its devastating effects on victims and the credibility of peacekeeping missions.

- **Example:** Between 2015 and 2023, 90% of the 350 SEA allegations in MONUSCO remain unresolved due to TCC inaction (United Nations Conduct and Discipline Unit, 2023). Over 350 SEA allegations in MONUSCO during this period, 90% remain unresolved primarily because Troop-Contributing Countries refused to prosecute their soldiers. The UN lacks jurisdiction to enforce criminal trials, leaving it dependent on TCC cooperation, which is often absent due to political sensitivities or national pride.

Low Conviction Rates

Only a fraction of SEA cases lead to convictions, as survivors’ voices are systematically silenced

Example: Across all peacekeeping missions, less than 10% of SEA cases lead to convictions. Many are dismissed due to a lack of evidence or witness intimidation. This contributes to the widespread perception that peacekeepers operate with immunity.

Inaccessible Reporting Mechanisms

Limited access to adequate reporting channels perpetuates silence and discourages survivors from coming forward.

Example: In MONUSCO, 75% of survivors chose not to report abuses due to stigma and ineffective mechanisms (West et al., 2021, p. 4).

Patriarchal Roots of Impunity

Patriarchal norms within UN structures prioritize male authority and mission legitimacy, fostering a culture of silence. UN mechanisms like “hotlines” or complaint boxes, survivors report difficulty in accessing or trusting them. In MONUSCO, 75% of SEA victims never filed official complaints. Language barriers, lack of anonymity, and fear of retaliation discouraged reporting.

Analysis: As Enloe (2014, p. 133) explains, patriarchal frameworks silence survivors and protect perpetrators, sustaining SEA and marginalizing women, which is evident from all these examples

3. Concluding Remarks

The issue of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) within gender-focused structures of UN peacekeeping missions in Africa signifies a deep institutional failure, rooted in intersectional silencing and entrenched patriarchal norms. Feminist analysis highlights how structural silence within these missions systematically disregards the voices of African women—including those from Congo, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic—whose overlapping identities of race, poverty, gender, and post-colonial realities render their experiences invisible to the system. In MONUSCO, hundreds of SEA cases have been documented over the years, yet only a fraction are reported due to patriarchal mission cultures, poor oversight, and inaccessible reporting systems. Biases rooted in colonial legacies further deprioritize justice for African women. Similarly, in UNMISS, abuses in locations like Malakal have never been highlighted by the news, and in MINUSCA, allegations of SEA highlight the incapability and inability of gender-focused units to support survivors adequately. Intersectional silencing often leads to double victimization. African women are harmed in spaces meant to protect them, such as Women, Peace, and Security (WPS)

programs, and further marginalized by social stigma and systemic exclusion. Survivors are labelled derogatorily, ostracized, and sometimes left alone to raise their children without societal support. Accountability remains a major gap. Few cases result in convictions, and a significant number go unaddressed because troop-contributing countries fail to investigate or prosecute perpetrators. Institutional shortcomings, such as militarized attitudes and insufficiently equipped gender units, shield offenders, allowing SEA to persist unchecked. Despite reports being made public, the UN's inability to address the underlying vulnerabilities undermines its peacekeeping efforts and credibility. This crisis urgently calls for transformative reforms to dismantle patriarchal structures, amplify African women's voices, and address the multifaceted vulnerabilities they face. Without systemic change, SEA will continue to harm communities already devastated by conflict, perpetuating cycles of abuse, exclusion, and impunity. Urgent reforms are essential to dismantle intersectional silencing, amplify African women's voices, and restore trust in UN peacekeeping by addressing SEA impunity.

Possible Measures for Reform:

1. **Independent Tribunal:** Establish a UN tribunal specifically to prosecute SEA cases, bypassing TCC jurisdiction.
2. **Survivor-Led Reporting:** Develop confidential reporting systems led by African women, ensuring cultural and gender-sensitive mechanisms.
3. **Intersectionality Training:** Mandate training for peacekeepers that addresses militarized masculinities, racial biases, and intersectional vulnerabilities.
4. **Strengthen WPS Units:** Allocate resources to fund and staff WPS programs with African feminist experts.
5. **Socioeconomic Support:** Provide aid and support to reduce displaced women's vulnerability to SEA.
6. **Data Transparency:** Improve SEA data collection and disaggregation by race and socioeconomic status for accountability and informed policymaking.

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