

Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by Peacekeeping Operations in Contemporary Africa

In international peacekeeping operations (PKOs) some individuals are involved in sexual exploitation and abuse of the host country's population, buying of sexual services and trafficking of prostitutes. Far from being a new phenomenon it goes back a long time, and reports on the issue have increased over the years. All too frequently we read about peacekeepers visiting prostitutes, committing rape, or in other ways sexually exploiting host populations. Some peacekeepers are taking advantage of the power their work gives them, and becoming abusers rather than protectors in situations where the host population is powerless and in dire need of protection. Peacekeepers' abuse of their mandate is inflicting severe damage on host societies and often results in a number of unintended consequences such as human rights violations, rapid spread of HIV, decreased trust in the UN as well as other international aid

agencies, and harmful changes to gender patterns. Women and children, both girls and boys, are especially exposed. Having already suffered from war and instability they risk becoming even more physically and mentally wounded. Peacekeeping operations risk doing more harm than good in African war zones, and if they cannot learn from previous mistakes maybe they ought to stay at home. We do not argue for the latter; rather, we point towards the urgent need to change explicit and implicit patterns and habits in international peacekeeping operations in relation to sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) in Africa. In this Policy Note we focus predominantly on military staff, but acknowledge that the civilian staff of PKOs, and international aid workers, are also implicated. On the other hand it should initially be pointed out that most PKO staff are not sexual exploiters and abusers.

Sexual exploitation and abuse in peacekeeping operations

In 2003 the United Nations issued a decree, the *Secretary-General's Bulletin* (SGB), prohibiting acts of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse by UN Staff, where sexual exploitation is defined as "any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another", and sexual abuse as "the actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions" (p. 1). Under section 3 of the SGB it was further clarified that sexual activities with persons below 18 years of age, as well as all forms of transactional sex, are prohibited and that all sexual relationships between UN staff and the host population are strongly discouraged. UN workers were furthermore obliged to report acts of SEA through established reporting mechanisms (although such mechanisms were far from fully instituted) and it was recognized that SEA constituted "acts of serious misconduct and are therefore grounds for disciplinary measures, including summary dismissal" (p. 2). The UN established further guidelines for SEA in peacekeeping operations to strengthen the SGB in 2005. The report *A Comprehensive Strategy to Eliminate Future Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations* by the former civilian peacekeeper and permanent representative of Jordan, Prince Zeid, was established as a handbook on how to handle misconduct.

In 2007 the General Assembly adopted some of Zeid's

recommendations. The UN standards of conduct, also including SEA, were incorporated in the revised Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), signed by the UN and the Troop Contributing Countries (TCC). The SGB was thus included into the new MOU, applying to all TCCs – previously the SGB had only applied to civilian (non-police) UN staff and the UN country team (Jennings p. 15). The Zeid report also resulted in the forming of a Conduct and Discipline Unit (CDU). This consists of two sub-units, one at the headquarters and one in the PKO. Their main task is to strengthen accountability and uphold standards of conduct in the United Nations PKO's. Today we can see those units in 17 different missions including – in Africa – those in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Liberia and Sudan. Also, two groups of legal experts were formed, in order to deal with the problems of accountability of peacekeepers guilty of misconduct. The working groups report to the UN on their work on a regular basis. These groups also advocate for more medical, legal and psychological assistance to be given to SEA victims (Jennings p. 17f).

In the fog of peacekeeping

One of the first reported incidents of SEA by PKOs dates back to 1992. In the 1996 report by Graca Machel it was stated that SEA had occurred in the United Nations Operation in Mozambique (ONUMOZ), where soldiers recruited teenage girls into prostitution (Machel p. 24). It was concluded that peacekeeping troops were a contributing factor in the increase of women and children involved

in sexual work in Mozambique. More accusations against peacekeeping personnel followed in a number of African countries – that is, the DRC, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Eritrea. Most cases involve women and children who are forced, due to lack of economic opportunities, to sell their bodies in exchange for food, a small amount of money and/or protection. This activity has been labelled “survival sex” and has particularly been reported in the DRC with reference to the United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC), but is unfortunately a general feature of PKOs worldwide. In the DRC members of the local population have been raped and handed goods afterwards in order to make the acts look agreed (Allred p. 5). Taking temporary girlfriends or “wives” also tends to be a common practice for peacekeeping personnel. Peacekeepers give them food, money and protection and some even consider this as helping the local population. In the DRC, as in other African PKOs, taking local girlfriends is a grey area, and it is very hard to decide whether it consists of a relationship between two lovers or sexual exploitation; yet it is clear that it can be defined as SEA according to the definition in the SGB.

Save the Children UK has published several reports about peacekeepers (and aid staff) who commit acts of sexual misconduct with children. Their reports show that the problem is continuous and furthermore underreported. In the report *No one to turn to* (2008) they found that a total of 23 organizations involved in peacekeeping activities and humanitarian aid were implicated in SEA against children and that local and international, organizations, including religious ones, harboured perpetrators. The sexual abuse was most common among the PKOs and consisted of trading sex for food, forced sex, verbal sexual abuse, child prostitution, child pornography, sexual slavery, indecent sexual assault and child trafficking.

Many children have lost their families in the war, which makes them especially vulnerable to SEA. There are many children staying with distant relatives, or living in temporary shelters or on the streets. Perpetrators often target these children, since they are most likely not to report to any authorities. Similarly, camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, with high numbers of temporary populations, including a large number of orphaned children, are zones of increased vulnerability where adults are actually found sending children and young women away for sexual relationships, due to both poverty and lack of security.

Peacekeepers’ sexual relationships with local women may result in so-called “peace babies”. Women become pregnant and are abandoned by the baby’s father, if not when they get pregnant then often when the PKO leaves. In these situations, the woman has to deal with the problem of providing for her child and often experiences social stigma because of the ambiguous status of the child. The cessation of economic support often causes anger among the local population. This easily results in hostility towards the PKO. For example in 2003 in a town in the DRC, “peace babies” and the paternity disputes that followed caused hostility between local men and peacekeepers, affecting the peace-building process. This creates antagonism rather than preventing it, which counteracts the whole purpose of the PKO’s presence. Frictions also lead to direct hazards for peacekeepers, including risks

of outright attacks by semi-militant host populations. The legitimacy of the PKO thereby becomes weakened and work for sustainable peace becomes inefficient.

In the presence of the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia/Eritrea (UNMEE) in Eritrea at the beginning of 2001, three Danish soldiers were prosecuted for having sex with a 13-year-old girl. Furthermore, in 2002, an Irish soldier was prosecuted for making pornographic movies with Eritrean women. He was sentenced to 16 days’ detention by the UN court and was later dismissed from the mission. Yet the punishment for the women involved was far tougher. One of the women, a 22-year-old, was sent to prison for two years. Since then several women have been arrested, allegedly for prostitution. A couple of months after the incident involving the Irish soldier, an Italian soldier was accused of similar behaviour and the entire peacekeeping operation threatened to collapse. The population of Eritrea was outraged and accused the troops of “bringing their sick mentality” to their country (Barth p. 14).

In Liberia in 2006 eight SEA cases involving peacekeeping staff were reported to the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) and one of the cases resulted in one person being sent home. Here, as elsewhere, there is a high number of SEA cases among peacekeeping staff, which are never reported or investigated – thus making it possible for violators to continue to work in other peacekeeping operations.

In Operation Restore Hope in Somalia, during the early 1990s, there were numerous cases of misconduct such as torture, rape, and summary killing. The misconduct of the Canadian Special Force got particular attention, but was, according to Alex de Waal (2007), only “the tip of the iceberg”. He further states: “The level of resentment among ordinary Somalis at these abuses should not be underestimated, nor should the implications for the failure of the mission.” A previous study on the Canadian troops pointed out: “They were vehemently opposed to homosexuality and saw efforts to discipline soldiers who harassed women and minorities as limiting the military’s capacity to produce effective soldiers. As one soldier explained, men who spend a great deal of time together feel a need to prove they are not homosexuals by going out and ‘getting themselves a woman’: ‘when we go out the woman becomes a machine, an object that we’d use as much as possible, and talk about as much as possible because afterwards there won’t be any woman around’” (Razack p. 138). The Somali case is particularly instructive in showing how failure to respect the norms of the host country endangers a whole mission and furthermore makes redeployment in a country difficult. It also highlights the sad outcome of militarised masculinity where a military culture, insensitive to gender equality and rights or deprecatory to women in general, allows men to violate women in ways that would never be accepted in mainstream society.

HIV and AIDS

The increasing extent of multidimensional peacekeeping operations has been proved to be contributing to the spread of HIV and AIDS in Africa. Peacekeeping personnel are key vectors of the virus. The infection rate among military personnel is significantly higher than among groups in the

civilian populations. This is a clear indication that PKO personnel have sexual contact with more partners and/or with high-risk partners such as prostitutes. The spread takes place from peacekeeper to locals, from locals to peacekeeper and from one peacekeeper to another. In several examples host populations have expressed great frustration with the UN and the international community, since peacekeeping troops serving in their country have severely increased the prevalence of HIV and AIDS.

Peacekeeping forces comprising staff from Africa is specific risk factors. A study done in 1999 showed that 40-60% of the Angolan and the DRC armies tested HIV-positive. In the South African army, the number was as high as 60-70%. In 2005, 50% of the Malawian army was expected to die from AIDS and in Botswana one in three soldiers were infected with HIV (Tripodi and Patel p. 54f). However, data showing accurate infection rates is lacking, which makes preventive work complicated. Most often information about HIV infection in a country is sensitive, since it is seen as showing up the country's weakness. Therefore it becomes hard to confirm exact numbers of those infected. A problem in relation to the continued spread of infection among troops is that the Security Council does not have the authority to order mandatory testing for peacekeepers. This makes it hard to establish infection rates before and after deployment. However, the numbers available indicate a growing problem.

During the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, tens of thousands of peacekeeping personnel were brought in. This resulted in a remarkable rise in HIV infection rates among host populations, thus creating a new "hot zone" in a part of Africa that had previously showed relatively low infection rates. Likewise, troops from countries with low infection rates were infected to a high degree, making many of them vectors when they returned home. The correlation between peacekeeping and increasing HIV infection in Sierra Leone was exemplified in the Nigerian troops. The Nigerian Operation Sandstorm stayed in Sierra Leone for three years and the number of HIV-infected soldiers correlated with the length of the operation – the number of infected rose from 7% in the first year to 10% in the second year, and subsequently to 15% in the third year (Bazergan p. 37).

Peacekeeping problems

How is it that the same pattern of SEA involving PKOs is repeated over and over again? There are several causal factors involved. PKOs attract sex workers and there is a historic relationship between soldiers and sex workers. The extreme situations that people live in, either in conflict or post-conflict settings, often means that there is an acute lack of economic opportunities. War scatters families and destroys social structures, leaving women and children to support themselves. In many cases women, or their families, come to the desperate conclusion that female bodies are the only commodities they have to trade with. Further establishing sexual relationships with PKOs is a tactical measure used to obtain security for oneself, relatives and friends. PKO staff earn considerably more money than the local populations do – often as much as 50 times more. This means that there is an extremely unbalanced power situation in the peacekeeping area, which

gives the PKO staff an opportunity to buy whatever they want in an area. Cases show that sexual favours are one of the things that PKO staff buy from the host community.

Heightened sexual consumption is an unfortunate characteristic of militarised masculinities. It is often considered kosher, or culturally accepted, among PKO personnel to buy sexual services and/or visit brothels. The expression "Boys will be boys" seems to be a common, albeit sad, phrase in military troops around the world (Martin p. 2). In some societies prostitution is even considered as something commonplace. Among staff originating from societies where prostitution is considered wrong and is less common, a masculinised military culture within the PKO often suppresses individual moral ideals of commercial sex as wrong.

When a soldier (or international aid worker) is accused of rape or of buying sexual services, it is most often very difficult to get sufficient evidence. The victims are often scared of testifying since that could result in threats and even more harm for themselves and their families. This means that PKO personnel can commit sexual assaults with very little risk of legal or other consequences.

In the few cases where a soldier after investigation is found guilty of SEA the UN has limited means of reprimand and penalty. The choice of punishment tends to be left to the military chain of command. The chief UN punishment for the culprit is repatriation. If the crime is severe and a trial ensues, either in civil or military courts, it is done in the soldier's home country – far away from evidence and witnesses. This often results in dropped charges. Although the Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) can waive the immunity of UN staff in peacekeeping operations this cannot be done for military personnel, thus making trials in the host country impossible. On the other hand adequate trials are seldom feasible in these countries (see Jennings p. 20f). The current opacity of the legal system gives PKOs unnecessarily confusing signals about right and wrong and, more seriously, leads to a system of semi-impunity.

Despite stipulated codes of conduct there seems to be a lack of understanding and respect for how SEA affects both individuals and entire host countries in the longer term. It is clear that the brunt of responsibility rests with heads of operation and senior officers. Partly, the situation reflects a general disregard from their side of SEA regulations, and partly it highlights commanders' lack of control over their own soldiers. Many senior officers do not actively work to stop inappropriate behaviour, overlooking for instance the fact that some of their soldiers are buying sexual services. This lack of active leadership against SEA shows indirectly an acceptance of this type of behaviour. At times senior officers themselves set bad examples.

Recommendations in relation to SEA and the spread of HIV and AIDS

- A militarised masculinity in PKOs is a particular problem for SEA. In order to minimize such negative patterns more women could be recruited to future PKOs. We need to investigate how that can be possible. In doing so there is a specific need to examine practices that deter women from joining peacekeeping operations and furthermore to make PKO assignments more attractive to women. Finally we need to acknowledge that as an initial step

only. It is naive to believe that by simply adding female soldiers and commanders a cultural change will naturally unfold. Therefore, female soldiers in tandem with majority male soldiers must be given increased structural tools to deal with SEA.

- Gender analysis needs to be done at every stage of a peacekeeping operation, starting at the pre-planning stage. Gender analysis is important in order to be able to see women's and men's different needs in conflict or post-conflict areas. In this way it can be adapted to the PKO's work. It is furthermore important as a means of reminding PKO staff of their gendered roles and getting them to question these. A gender adviser should be employed in every peacekeeping operation. There must be close collaboration with the local community and with women's organizations in order to prevent unintended consequences.
- All PKOs need systematic pre-deployment training focusing on gender realities in the host country. Regularly in-mission training should also be carried out, to always ensure up-to-date knowledge among the troops. Continuous education in how to act responsibly and according to the UN Code of Conduct is needed. PKOs must furthermore, through training, be made aware of negative traits within their own, military (and at times Western) culture.
- PKO personnel must be able to understand and take responsibility for SEA in relation to the individual victim and to the entire host country. They must be thoroughly informed that SEA will also have negative consequences for the PKO in the host country – including security implications – as well as for PKOs in other countries and on future missions. For this to be done effectively case studies from previous PKOs ought to be used.
- It is pivotal that the senior leadership of PKO are strict in applying their command to do no harm. Apathy will encourage misconduct. Senior officers must be responsible for creating an environment where misconduct is eliminated and there ought to be legal possibilities of holding them responsible for their soldiers.
- As this policy note shows, although a clear code of conduct on SEA is available to PKOs, there is limited legal means to punish those breaking SEA regulations. At present a system of semi-impunity prevails. In order to effectively work against SEA in PKOs a transparent and inclusive system of dealing with legal issues within PKOs is necessary.
- Clear procedures for legal aid, medical support and counselling of victims of SEA should be the obvious responsibility of the PKO. This shows the local population that they are not left alone, and thus strengthens the role of the UN. Every mission should have a strategy of outreach to the host society, including the spread of information on their legal rights in relation to PKO staff guilty of SEA and the establishment of agencies that are able to receive and deal appropriately with reports on SEA. The use of a worldwide database providing information on individuals who have been repatriated, or have their contracts terminated, due to misconduct should be encouraged. This will bar SEA offenders from future employment in overseas missions hosted by the UN.
- A general point is that punishments must be more severe than is the case today: that sexual assault by PKO personnel is punished

with summary dismissal only is not good enough and is certainly not do-no-harm. It is thus of utmost importance that the UN work towards a framework with Troop Contributing Countries (TCC) that commits them to prosecute their own civilian and military personnel for criminal acts committed in PKOs.

- Enhanced education on HIV awareness and prevention is crucial. Senior officers should be responsible for training their troops, in cooperation with NGOs and medical staff. Young military staff in particular tend to highly respect senior officers, which increases the efficiency of the training programmes. Infected soldiers could also be used as teachers to educate troops about HIV. HIV and AIDS awareness posters and cards should always be available in all relevant languages, in addition to English and French, and always be connected to education on awareness. The local community also needs more education and training about HIV and AIDS.
- Former studies show good results from letting infected soldiers stay and perform their tasks as long as possible. Otherwise there is a great risk that the soldiers will not want to disclose the fact that they are infected, because of the risk of being sent home and thereby losing important income. If this path is taken the PKO needs to have a working strategy of how to avoid further spread of infection to the host population. More research is required on this topic.

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