

# SPECIAL REPORT

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## Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by Male Peacekeepers

By Jessica Anania, Angelina Mendes, and Robert U. Nagel



UN peacekeeping troops collect weapons and other materials from the army headquarters of Côte d'Ivoire's strongman Laurent Gbagbo in April 2011. (Photo by Jane Hahn/AP)

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## Summary

- Sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers remains an ongoing problem for UN missions, despite prevention policies implemented over the past two decades.
- Most UN policies are reactive and focus on accountability and criminalization of sexual misconduct, with responsibility for enforcement falling on troop-contributing countries, which are mostly in the Global South, while mission-funding countries are mostly in the Global North.
- This creates an insidious dynamic that lays bare structural deficiencies in the UN peacekeeping system that contribute to and exacerbate sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Though the UN has zero tolerance policies in place at the organizational level, implementation is hindered by lack of accurate reporting data and by enforcement responsibility falling to troop-contributing countries.
- Additionally, relevant training materials lack standardization and contextualization. Materials and programming should be tailored specifically to the troop-contributing and host countries and to various peacekeeper roles.
- Prevention efforts must also address the racism, sexism, and other underlying issues, and increase press freedom in troop-sending and host countries as it leads to transparency and accountability.



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**GENDER**

## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines the UN's responses to sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers, including its increasing emphasis on accountability and training. Prepared by members of the Missing Peace Scholars Network, a global community of scholars researching innovative ways to prevent sexual violence in conflict, the report was supported by the United States Institute of Peace, the Peace Research Institute Oslo, Women in International Security, and the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis.

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Turkish Cypriot women attend a peace rally in Ledras Palace inside the UN buffer zone in the divided capital Nicosia, Cyprus, on March 8, 2017. (Photo by Petros Karadjias/AP)

## Introduction

Sexual exploitation and abuse by UN peacekeeping forces first came to international attention in 1993 as an issue in the UN's peacekeeping operations in Cambodia. In the more than quarter century since then, reports of sexual exploitation and abuse have emerged in all deployed UN peacekeeping operations.<sup>1</sup> The problem persists despite its increasingly higher profile and numerous policy responses. According to UN data released in February 2020, allegations rose 43 percent from 2018 to 2019, despite ongoing efforts to address the problem.<sup>2</sup>

Sexual exploitation and abuse threaten the process and outcomes of peace operations on multiple levels.<sup>3</sup> On the individual level, sexual coercion exacerbates human rights abuses for victims and survivors in communities that are already struggling with violence and poverty. It contributes to an environment of insecurity and fosters resentment of interveners. On the mission level, it damages relations with local populations, compromises the mission's impartiality, diverts attention and important resources from other needed work and priorities, and reduces interveners' confidence in their own mission.<sup>4</sup> On the international level, it hurts the credibility and legitimacy of peacekeeping operations specifically, and the UN and humanitarian organizations more broadly. On the structural level, it normalizes the behaviors related to sexual exploitation of vulnerable populations by powerful actors, including other interveners and host state forces. These violations build on and entrench heteronormative, racist, colonial, and economic power dynamics that foster insecurity and contribute to a culture of violence.

Prevention efforts to date have tended to be reactive, treating sexual exploitation and abuse as a disciplinary matter pertaining to individual perpetrators and disconnected from structural dynamics. Furthermore, while the term *peacekeepers* encompasses civilian, military, and police personnel, prevention efforts often focus exclusively on military personnel, perhaps out of the erroneous belief that it is primarily military forces who perpetuate these violations. In fact, allegations of sexual misconduct have been made against peacekeepers in civilian, military, and police roles. Of the eighty such allegations made in 2019, forty-nine were against military personnel, twenty-five were against civilians, and six were against police officers.<sup>5</sup> Sexual exploitation and abuse may occur in various forms and for different reasons across these separate roles, and programming must take these differences into account when training peacekeeping personnel. The UN has focused on training and accountability measures rather than on addressing the structural inequalities linked to gender, racism, colonial legacies, and global economic and power relations.

Consequently, policy responses to the problem of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers have failed to effect meaningful change even when the UN has sought to connect them to relevant initiatives and discourses, including work on conflict-related sexual violence specifically and the women, peace, and security (WPS) agenda generally. The WPS agenda, adopted in 2000 as part of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, highlights the gender dynamics of armed conflicts and emergencies and stresses the need to protect vulnerable populations and address various forms of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence.<sup>6</sup> The WPS agenda calls for member states to develop National Action Plans to demonstrate their commitment to gender equality and the prevention of sexual violence in conflict situations. Although there has been some progress in addressing these violations, the UN continues to treat conflict-related sexual violence as a separate policy arena from sexual exploitation and abuse, with the latter further removed from the wider WPS policy framework.<sup>7</sup> Effective prevention necessitates addressing both agents—peacekeepers—and root causes, including patriarchy, racism, colonial legacies, and global economic and power relations.

The official UN strategy for addressing sexual exploitation and abuse is three-pronged: prevention of misconduct, enforcement of UN standards of conduct, and remediation.<sup>8</sup> Over the past two decades, the UN has repeatedly passed resolutions, authored reports, and issued policy bulletins outlining these three key program elements. In the last five years, the UN Security Council has adopted UNSCR 2272 (2016), which has the aim of limiting sexual exploitation and abuse; declared the problem a top priority (2017, 2019); and adopted UNSCR 2436 (2018), which, among other points, reaffirmed the UN's commitment to a zero tolerance policy.<sup>9</sup>

This report addresses the question of why, after two decades of the WPS agenda and policy responses to sexual exploitation and abuse, more progress has not been made in preventing these violations. In answering this question, we examine the UN's responses, including its zero tolerance policy, its focus on accountability and training, and the push to increase the number of female peacekeepers. In evaluating these international measures, we identify shortcomings in the implementation of each measure and highlight a central barrier: the failure to address the structural factors contributing to and facilitating sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers.

# Zero Tolerance Policy Proclamation

Seventeen years ago the UN secretary-general issued a bulletin outlining a zero tolerance policy on sexual exploitation and abuse applicable to all UN staff, and the responsibilities of mission leadership to implement accountability, including through referral of cases to national bodies for criminal prosecution.<sup>10</sup> The policy statement has several parts. First, it declares these violations to be serious misconduct warranting disciplinary measures, including summary dismissal. Second, it prohibits sexual activity with a minor (a person under the age of eighteen), regardless of the local age of consent, and specifically rejects as a defense a mistaken belief that the child is older. Third, it prohibits the exchange of sexual favors for money, employment, goods, or services. Fourth, it strongly discourages even consensual sexual relationships between UN staff and those receiving assistance because of the inherently unequal power dynamic between interveners and local populations. Fifth, it stipulates that UN staff members have an obligation to report concerns about sexual exploitation or abuse by fellow workers through established reporting mechanisms. And sixth, it requires UN staff to create and foster an environment that prevents sexual abuse. In addition, all non-UN organizations or individuals that work with the UN are required to accept and implement these principles as a condition for the cooperation agreement.

Following the 2005 report “A Comprehensive Strategy to Eliminate Future Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations,” sexual exploitation and abuse became a prominent issue on the international agenda and a controversial topic for international media attention. Referred to as “the Zeid Report” (it was prepared by Prince Zeid Ra’ad Zeid Al-Hussein, special adviser to the secretary-general), this was supposed to usher in a new era of prevention, monitoring, and reporting efforts by the UN to address sexual violence related to peacekeeping operations.

## OBSTACLES TO ACHIEVING ZERO TOLERANCE

Despite the issuance of the zero tolerance policy, several obstacles, including a lack of accurate reporting data and the designation of responsibility for enforcement to troop-contributing countries, have undermined its effectiveness in preventing sexual exploitation and abuse. Moreover, the idea of zero tolerance itself has been characterized as overly generalized and a one-size-fits-all solution. For instance, it can be construed as drawing a moral equivalency between consensual relationships and violent rape, as both fall within the remit of zero tolerance.<sup>11</sup> Zero tolerance policies have also been criticized for denying the agency of individuals who engage in transactional sex with peacekeepers, and for burying the underlying structural inequalities that lead to abuse in fragile contexts.<sup>12</sup> Such a policy, however, does provide benefit by communicating clear norms and encouraging the UN, troop-contributing countries, and host countries to take steps toward preventing sexual abuse to the best of their ability.

For a zero tolerance policy to function, accurate data collection on instances of sexual exploitation and abuse perpetrated by peacekeepers is needed. Such data are used to inform zero tolerance policies; they also allow the UN to track the implementation and efficacy of prevention measures



Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the executive director of UN Women, speaks to reporters during a March 15, 2017 news conference at U.N. headquarters. (Photo by Mary Altaffer/AP)

in the field. In 2006 the UN began keeping records of these allegations in peace operations. From 2008 through 2018, the UN's Department of Field Support (DFS) also managed a confidential misconduct tracking system that allows allegations to be reported anonymously; the Department of Operational Support (DOS) took over the system in 2019 when it replaced the DFS following a UN

reorganization. The data are publicly accessible, allowing in theory external accountability from advocates and researchers. The data are intended to enable the UN to design policy and monitor the organization's progress, including measuring the impact of policies addressing this issue.

In practice, however, the actual data collected have been described as "difficult to parse, inconsistent, and incomplete."<sup>13</sup> For instance, incidents involving multiple victims or multiple perpetrators have been reported as a single allegation. This conflation distorts sexual exploitation and abuse data.<sup>14</sup> Lack of accurate data also means that variables that may explain different levels or patterns of these violations between missions may be obscured. Data on these allegations are currently available for download only in file formats (image, PDF, or PowerPoint) that are difficult to use and impede rather than facilitate comprehensive analysis.

Data inaccuracies are further compounded by lack of reporting. This may be due to survivors' intimidation or fear of reprisal—for UN peacekeepers are seen as "part of [a] powerful organization"—or it may result from survivors' mobility.<sup>15</sup> In the fragile contexts in which peacekeepers are deployed, populations may move frequently, and individuals may lack a permanent address or even a phone number. This makes it more difficult for survivors to report abuses in the first place, and for investigators to follow up allegations of abuse. Research has also indicated that soldiers may be reluctant to report fellow soldiers who perpetrate these violations. This solidarity could be another barrier to reporting and the collection of accurate data.<sup>16</sup> It is estimated that sexual exploitation and abuse occur at a much higher level than reported in official UN data and that the reported rates may be "just the tip of the iceberg."<sup>17</sup> The lack of accurate reporting data means not only that zero tolerance measures are likely to be informed by flawed data but also that tracking the implementation and impact of a zero tolerance policy on rates of sexual violence in the field is difficult.

Even when allegations are reported, there may be internal motivations that hinder documentation. Local units may be responsible both for preventing sexual exploitation and abuse and for documenting and reporting allegations. Therefore, reporting allegations may indicate a local unit's own failure to effectively prevent violations, disincentivizing the documentation of such data. This was observed during the peacekeeping mission in Liberia, where the UN's Conduct and Discipline Unit's dual responsibilities to both prevent and process allegations of such violations meant the unit was "less than keen to uncover misconduct."<sup>18</sup> Where capacity permits, the responsibility to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse must be separated from the responsibility to document cases of abuse.

While the UN can announce a zero tolerance policy, the responsibility for actually enforcing the policy falls to the troop-contributing countries and the commanding officers in the respective military and police units. If individual battalion commanders and the mission force commander do not uphold the zero tolerance policy, the policy fails. Despite the UN's stated commitment to eliminating sexual exploitation and abuse, some mission commanders see such concerns as secondary, or they may lack the capacity to implement zero tolerance policies. These enforcement and accountability issues are discussed further in the next section.

## Accountability and Criminalization

The 2005 Zeid Report included key recommendations for promoting the UN standards of conduct; reforming the process for investigating allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse; strengthening organizational, managerial, and command responsibility; and instituting individual disciplinary, financial, and criminal accountability.<sup>19</sup> In the years since the release of the report, the UN has implemented a range of measures, policies, and practices based on the recommendations contained in it. Following release of the report, the Conduct and Discipline Unit at UN headquarters was established to provide oversight for all field mission conduct and discipline through its training, policies, awareness campaigns, and abuse allegations tracking. Conduct and Discipline Teams do not conduct investigations but assess sexual exploitation and abuse allegations to determine whether an investigation is necessary before referring the case to the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services. The DFS, which was responsible for the Conduct and Discipline Unit and Conduct and Discipline Teams at the time, adopted a three-pronged strategy: the creation of specific training programs, establishment of investigative and victim assistance procedures, and amendment of the memorandum of understanding (MOU) that regulates the relationship between troop-contributing countries and the UN.<sup>20</sup> The amendment to the MOU required troop-contributing countries to report any action taken on sexual exploitation and abuse cases referred through the UN investigation system.

The broad range of administrative directives, including resolutions, bulletins, and reports, that cover UN codes of conduct apply to all UN personnel and are accepted by all troop- and police-contributing countries. In recent years the UN has focused heavily on standardized training, including the launch of new online training modules for the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, the introduction of public awareness campaigns in host countries, increased vetting of recruitment candidates, and the development of strategies and tools for assessing and managing the risk of

such violence occurring during field missions. Additional accountability measures currently being adopted by the UN include the establishment of Immediate Response Teams to ensure efficient collection and safeguarding of evidence of possible crimes of this nature, and a systemwide Incident Reporting Form that is being field-tested in the Democratic Republic of Congo.<sup>21</sup>

In August 2015 the UN issued its “Policy on Accountability for Conduct and Discipline in Field Missions.” The policy outlines how accountability issues related to misconduct can be addressed both during field missions and at headquarters when personnel fail to uphold UN standards of conduct. The policy specifies that “member states have the primary responsibility for investigating all alleged acts of misconduct committed by members of their national military contingents.” Additionally, in his 2015 statement to the UN Security Council, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon declared that troop-contributing countries had to shoulder responsibility for legal accountability for victims and survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse.<sup>22</sup>

The secretary-general’s remarks highlight the fact that only international courts and troop-contributing countries can exercise criminal jurisdiction for sexual exploitation and abuse crimes committed by their personnel during peacekeeping missions. In his 2015 address to the UN Security Council, Ban Ki-moon also requested that troop-contributing countries evaluate their existing national legal frameworks to assess whether or not new legislation was required to account for sex crimes committed by troops serving in UN peacekeeping missions. One of the measures taken to promote further criminal accountability was the establishment of on-site court martial proceedings for sex crimes under national legislation in cases involving members of troop-contributing countries. The secretary-general requested that troop-contributing countries agree to this measure, and as of December 2019, Egypt, Bangladesh, and South Africa had conducted on-site court martial proceedings.<sup>23</sup>

## **WHY CRIMINALIZATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY ARE NOT WORKING**

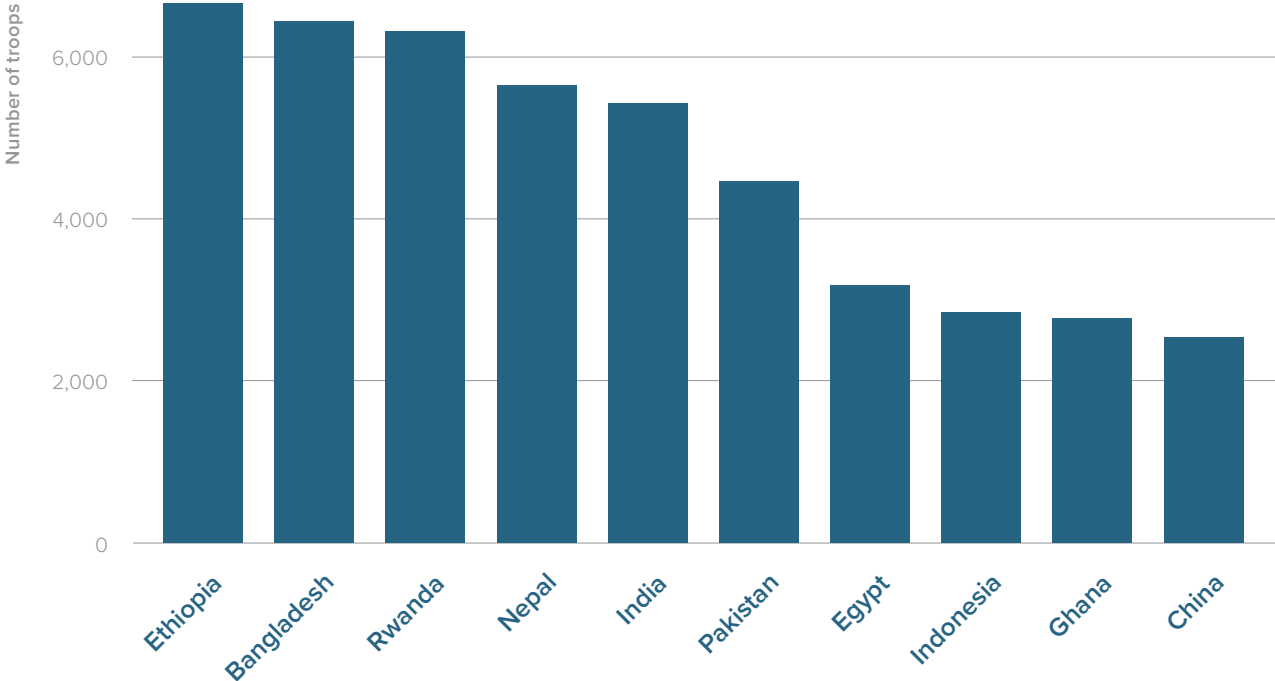
The failure of both Global North and Global South countries to adequately address sexual exploitation and abuse continues to nurture an environment that encourages impunity for these violations and a lack of justice for victims. Peacekeepers today are primarily sourced from Global South countries (see figure 1), which may have weak rule of law and inadequate legal systems, and often lack the capacity or willingness to exercise disciplinary action and uphold criminal jurisdiction that meets internationally accepted legal standards, such as appropriate laws covering extraterritorial sexual exploitation and abuse crimes.

These challenges are not faced only by countries from the Global South: Troop-contributing countries from the Global North, though they send the least number of UN peacekeepers, are also implicated in sexual exploitation and abuse of the populations they mingle with. Troop-contributing countries’ responsibilities for arresting, prosecuting, and punishing perpetrators of sexual abuse exist not only at the state level but also within mission and military- or police-unit command hierarchies. The importance of accountability at all levels is demonstrated by findings linking disciplinary breakdown to increased rates of misconduct.<sup>24</sup> Prevention efforts must be mindful to engage lower-level leadership and stakeholders to ensure discipline on the ground, rather than requiring accountability solely at the state level.



FIGURE 1.

# Top Troop-Contributing Countries to UN Peacekeeping Missions (March 2020)



Source: United Nations Peacekeeping, “Troop and Police Contributions,” <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>.

At the national level, however, accountability for sexual exploitation and abuse perpetrated by peacekeepers remains rare across troop-contributing countries from both the Global North and the Global South. This may be for both normative and capacity reasons. Moreover, the assumption that troop-contributing countries even want to assist in criminalizing and providing accountability for sexual exploitation and abuse is inherently flawed. Troop-contributing countries may tolerate these violations as a “practice of war” and, by extension, peacekeeping.<sup>25</sup> Peacekeeping forces face many challenges under extreme pressure and, as a result, may fail to prioritize this issue, despite research connecting gendered inequality and violence to challenges in reaching larger security and peacebuilding goals.<sup>26</sup>

Troop-contributing countries wanting to protect their reputation may also have an incentive to evade, rather than provide, criminal accountability for these allegations. Research on peacekeeping has documented awareness of that negative reputation and subsequent concern among peacekeepers themselves. This intersects with criticisms of peacekeeping as a colonial project with an ingrained bias against Global South troop-contributing countries. Peacekeepers from Global South countries report feeling “anxious about losing their reputation and status amongst other peacekeepers” while being held to different expectations, including their “antic-



Canadian judge Marie Deschamps (left), chair of the Independent Review Panel on UN Response to Allegations of Sexual Abuse by Foreign Military Forces in the Central African Republic, speaks at a news conference at the United Nations on December 17, 2015. (Photo by Richard Drew/AP)

ipated failure.”<sup>27</sup> When the onus of accountability falls on troop-contributing countries, which often have limited capacity, they are given a task that even heavily funded national militaries, such as the US military, are unable to address effectively.<sup>28</sup>

Countries of the Global South face most of the scrutiny for sexual exploitation and abuse be-

cause they provide the majority of peacekeepers, which leads them into an accountability trap. This scrutiny is intensified if those countries lack the capacity to provide accountability at the national level. This process may also be rooted in and perpetuated by racist or neocolonialist tropes, for instance a baseless belief in the “natural corruptibility” of Global South troops. Concerns over such tropes and the subsequent double standards for behavior are reflected in interviews with Global South peacekeepers.<sup>29</sup> Preventing sexual exploitation and abuse necessitates dismantling such biases so that Global North countries and the UN can work effectively and constructively with Global South troop-contributing countries.

When troop-contributing countries do seek to hold peacekeepers accountable for sexual exploitation and abuse, they may face confusion over how to translate high-level UN regulations into national-level prosecutions. There may also be uncertainty over how binding UN policies, such as the zero tolerance policy, actually are for the states themselves. At the national level, UN policies may be seen as suggestions rather than requirements. For instance, the rules of conduct outlined in *Ten Rules: Code of Personal Conduct for Blue Helmets* and *We Are United Nations Peacekeepers*, documents issued by the UN’s Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and geared toward member states’ military and police contingents, are viewed as guidelines and therefore lack a formal enforcement mechanism.

Troop-contributing countries may also fail to prosecute allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse for capacity reasons, such as weak or overly burdened domestic legal or judicial structures or a lack of funds. The importance of capacity is underscored by recent findings that strong rule-of-law institutions in both the troop-contributing country and the mission host country decrease the likelihood of these violations.<sup>30</sup> The UN must work alongside troop-contributing countries to bridge the gap between UN and national legislation through “issuing written advice and publishing model legislation.”<sup>31</sup>

At the UN level, there exists a difficult balance between pushing national states for accountability and the UN's continued reliance on the states' provision of peacekeeping forces. Past policy recommendations have included refusing to accept peacekeepers from countries that do not ensure accountability. UNSCR 2272 also called for the repatriation of peacekeeping units found to have perpetrated sexual exploitation and abuse. In an ideal world, the UN's zero tolerance policy would ensure that countries, units, and individuals found to perpetrate sexual violence would not be allowed to participate in a peacekeeping mission. In practice, however, the UN remains dependent on troop-contributing countries to provide peacekeepers. The UN must balance its own needs with enforcing some measure of accountability by removing perpetrators from the field.

The withholding of reimbursement funds from troop-contributing countries with credible allegations against them has also been endorsed as a prevention strategy. The withheld funds are then placed in the Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, which supports survivors.<sup>32</sup> This trust fund, however, currently provides support only to specific projects in Liberia, the Central African Republic (CAR), and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).<sup>33</sup> This program, as well as the Field Victims' Rights Advocates program currently operating in the CAR, DRC, Haiti, and South Sudan, should be expanded to all host countries in which sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers has been reported.<sup>34</sup> Not only would doing so provide mission-level assistance to survivors, the withholding of funds could incentivize troop-contributing countries to hold their peacekeepers accountable and work to prevent the perpetration of such violations by their troops.

Another strategy for pressuring troop-contributing countries to exercise accountability is the "naming and shaming" of countries that fail to prosecute sexual misconduct. This is done in the hope that identifying the countries against whose peacekeeping forces allegations are made will pressure troop-contributing countries to hold those individuals accountable.<sup>35</sup> Doing so, however, may disincentivize countries from providing troops to peacekeeping missions so as to avoid negative scrutiny.

Rather than naming and shaming through UN channels, the UN could instead bolster press freedom in both troop-contributing and host countries. Strong press freedom in troop-contributing and host countries has been linked to both fewer instances of and increased accountability for sexual exploitation and abuse.<sup>36</sup> A free press plays a crucial role in publicizing allegations and provoking public outrage. Member states should be encouraged to adopt legislation that protects press freedom, and the UN should provide states with sample draft legislation. The UN must also provide skills training and workshops to journalists in troop-contributing and host countries both to promote accurate and ethical reporting and to develop further communication channels between UN peacekeeping operations and local journalists.

This power of a free press to push for accountability was demonstrated in 2011 when a Haitian journalist published cell phone footage of four Uruguayan peacekeepers assaulting a Haitian teenager on a UN base. The story was quickly picked up and reported across print, digital, and broadcast media. The subsequent outrage on the part of both the public and state leaders led to the 2012 prosecution and conviction of the peacekeepers by Uruguay and the eventual withdrawal of Uruguayan forces from Haiti.<sup>37</sup> Despite efforts to promote criminalization and accountability, the fact that such accountability must take place at the national rather than the UN level raises several obstacles. These include the lack of capacity for providing accountability in troop-contributing countries and the lack of political will to pursue allegations.<sup>38</sup>

# Training on Gender

With the introduction of the UNSCR 1325 landmark WPS agenda in 2000, the issues of gender and conflict-related sexual violence have received unparalleled attention from the UN and the wider international community. The UN's approach to addressing the gender issue in peacekeeping operations has been two-pronged. The UN has emphasized the importance of gender mainstreaming throughout its processes, policies, practices, and mandates related to peacekeeping operations. Training has been cited as one of the best tools to mainstream gender perspectives, including those pertaining to sexual exploitation and abuse prevention in peace operations.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, the UN has focused on increasing the number of women peacekeepers.

Shocking revelations of peacekeeper-perpetrated sexual abuse in the DRC UN peacekeeping operation (known as MONUC, an acronym based on its French name) in 2004 highlighted the need for a policy that would go beyond a rules-based approach of discipline and punish, which the UN has tended to favor. The then director of the Office for Addressing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in MONUC recommended that peacekeeping personnel should receive mission- and context-specific training that would equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to prevent these violations and address the tendency for underreporting of incidents of abuse.<sup>40</sup>

The DPKO and the DFS released new guidance, “Gender Forward Looking Strategy (2014–2018),” which aimed to support the broader WPS agenda and recognize the changing operational environments of peacekeeping missions, and which highlighted specific DPKO priority areas for the integration of a gender-sensitive strategy.<sup>41</sup> In February 2018 the UN released further guidance with the “Gender Responsive United Nations Peacekeeping Operations” policy. This policy provided guidance for the DPKO and the DFS on integrating and operationalizing gender equality and the WPS mandates into all aspects of their work, and is still referenced in 2020 DOS publications.<sup>42</sup>

Consistent with its split-responsibility approach, divided between international UN civilian staff and troop-contributing countries, the UN provides standardized, mandatory predeployment training for all international UN civilian staff, whereas troop-contributing countries are responsible for providing mandatory predeployment training for their own military and police peacekeeping forces. Beginning in January 2017, all predeployment training for international UN civilian staff has been conducted by the Department of Peacekeeping Operations' Integrated Training Service at the Entebbe Support Base in Uganda. While the DPKO has developed standard training materials that it offers online to troop-contributing countries, along with additional support and guidance based on country requests, the level and quality of training provided by the national, regional, and subregional training centers of troop-contributing countries vary greatly.

The DPKO is responsible for providing troop-contributing countries with training materials related to the gender component of the Core Pre-deployment Training Materials (CPTM).<sup>43</sup> In addition to UN policies on sexual exploitation and abuse, the CPTM cover basic gender awareness issues, including an overview of conflict-related sexual violence and the significance of the WPS agenda.<sup>44</sup> The countries that are best equipped to provide comprehensive and adequate gender training for peacekeepers are mostly Euro-Western nations, which are also the countries that provide fewer peacekeepers.

UN peacekeepers stand near people waiting to enter the Central Mosque in Bangui's Muslim enclave of PK5, Central African Republic, on the occasion of Pope Francis's visit on September 14, 2017. (Photo by Jerome Delay/AP)



In addition to the mandatory predeployment training, the Integrated Training Mission Cells and Conduct and Discipline Teams in field missions provide further specific training during the mission. This covers topics that are specific to the particular mission and may include review of the UN's Code of Conduct and core values; types and conse-

quences of misconduct, with an emphasis on sexual exploitation and abuse; the obligation to report misconduct; how to report wrongdoing; disciplinary and administrative procedures; and the rights and responsibilities of the peacekeeping personnel.<sup>45</sup>

## OBSTACLES TO EFFECTIVE TRAINING

In September 2016 the UN officially launched its online training program on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse. According to the UN, "The training programme is mandatory for all uniformed and civilian personnel and is intended to strengthen training on the standards of conduct, as well as the expectations of accountability and individual responsibility in matters of conduct and discipline, with a special focus on sexual exploitation and abuse."<sup>46</sup> Despite these efforts, troop-contributing countries are still not mandated to incorporate such training materials into their predeployment training. This compliance problem illustrates one of the major challenges in addressing gender issues and advancing gender training in peacekeeping missions. Training addressing this issue has failed to prevent sexual violations for four reasons.

First, because troop-contributing countries are responsible for providing mandatory predeployment training for their own peacekeeping forces, there is currently no way to ensure baseline standardization. If a country does not have the capacity or will, the training sessions may even be provided by individuals with little expertise in or knowledge of gender or sexual exploitation and abuse.<sup>47</sup> This means that peacekeeping forces may arrive in conflict areas with widely different levels of knowledge about gender-relevant issues, including sexual exploitation and abuse prevention.

Second, in-mission training is conducted at the discretion of the mission leader and occurs in an ad hoc rather than standardized manner. Hence the UN must provide financial and technical support for both predeployment and in-mission training in instances where there is a lack of capacity to ensure a baseline level of standardization. Insofar as the majority of peacekeepers

The UN considers peacekeepers participating in transactional sex to be engaged in a form of sexual abuse. But within the military or police unit, however, transactional sex may be tolerated or normalized.

come from Global South countries, support for training would help compensate for this lack of capacity and relieve troop-contributing countries from taking on an additional burden. In addition to mandating that troop-contributing countries complete such a training, they should be required to develop benchmarks for the training, which troops would have to meet prior to deployment.

Third, gendered norms and inequalities within national military or police forces may percolate into the training materials. For instance, if a troop-contributing country considers sexual exploitation and abuse a secondary concern, comprehensive gender training may not be provided, or it may reflect that lack of importance, leading to violations on deployment of troops to the field. This lack of standardization of training materials may also lead to contradictory messaging, particularly when the training is at odds with cultural or military norms around sexual exploitation and abuse in the troop-sending or host country. For instance, the UN considers peacekeepers participating in transactional sex to be engaged in a form of sexual abuse. But within the military or policy unit, transactional sex may be tolerated or normalized. Because training in these matters is not standardized, there is no way to know whether such contradictory messaging is taking place.

Fourth, a lack of specificity in both predeployment and in-mission training undermines the effectiveness of such programming. Training must be contextualized to the troop-contributing country and host country, as well as specified for trainees' individual jobs. This includes presenting information in "culturally relevant ways" and tailored so that staff members understand their specific role in preventing sexual abuse.<sup>48</sup> Researchers observing gender training for peacekeepers between 2014 and 2016 found that "the mission-specific [national predeployment training] course missed the opportunity to provide context-specific training on gender dynamics and sexual and gender-based violence in the host state."<sup>49</sup> More specific training may also better address norms that fuel these violations, as "high-level consensus"—such as the UN's zero tolerance policy for sexual exploitation and abuse—may not directly translate into norm adoption at the field level.<sup>50</sup> Individual peacekeeping missions also develop their own cultures of norms and socialization processes, which can communicate tolerance or impunity for sexual abuse.<sup>51</sup> This underscores the need for training that goes beyond a basic conceptual overview of these issues to address militarized masculinities and historically condoned military practices, such as military prostitution, and national or military cultures that, when replicated in the field by peacekeepers, underpin sexual violations.<sup>52</sup> Training materials should also engage with the norms of individual missions themselves. Training techniques such as role playing and applied examples have been flagged as promising training tools, particularly for their ability to effect behavioral changes at the individual level.<sup>53</sup> Gender and sexual exploitation and abuse training should implement these techniques to help address relevant norms and behaviors among peacekeepers that underlie such violations.

# Increasing the Number of Women Peacekeepers

Even before the UN's zero tolerance policy emerged, some had perceived sexual exploitation and abuse as an issue connected to the lack of women in peacekeeping operations. As early as 1999, Judith Stiehm wrote that women's inclusion in missions put "new items on the agenda," including men's sexual misconduct.<sup>54</sup> Others have subsequently held that women's inclusion in peacekeeping operations changes the gendered dynamics and that the presence of women has a civilizing effect on male peacekeepers.<sup>55</sup> For example, Francesco Bertolazzi has said that "inside the mission, the female presence can sometimes act as a brake against possible violations of the code of conduct."<sup>56</sup> Relatedly, the Zeid Report concluded that increasing the share of women would bolster efforts to address this issue, stating that "the presence of more women in a mission, especially at senior levels, will help to promote an environment that discourages sexual exploitation and abuse" and "would facilitate efforts to encourage the reporting of abuse, which is the first step in eliminating it." The Swedish government has gone even further, arguing that more women in peacekeeping operations would help prevent sexual violations because women are less likely to perpetrate them.<sup>57</sup> These arguments boil down to reliance on two mechanisms: (1) a critical mass of women reducing misconduct and (2) women policing and deterring men's potential misconduct.

Even after issuance of the zero tolerance bulletin in 2003 and the Zeid Report in 2005, reports of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers continued. Kerry Crawford and Julia Macdonald suggest that these failures prompted the UN to react by redoubling its efforts to increase women's inclusion.<sup>58</sup> All-women units were deployed by India and Bangladesh as long ago as 2007.<sup>59</sup>

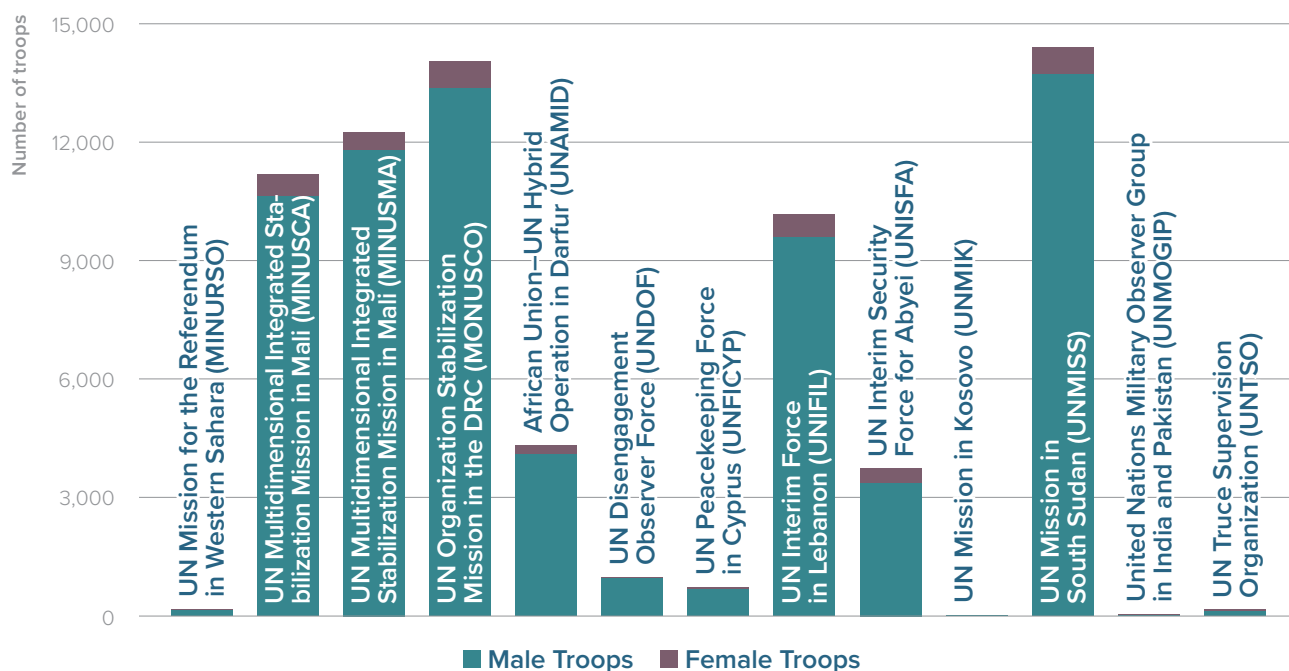
At first glance, there seems to be support for the notion that the presence of women in peacekeeping missions reduces incidents of sexual abuse. For example, Karim and Beardsley find a relationship between a higher share of female peacekeepers and a lower number of abuse allegations reported against military personnel.<sup>60</sup> Additional support comes from the UN mission in Liberia, where the deployment of a female-formed police unit (FFPU) reportedly reduced the number of rapes and sexual harassment generally and drastically reduced incidents of sexual exploitation and abuse specifically.<sup>61</sup> The commander of the FFPU seemed to support the critical mass argument, suggesting that women have a natural ability to relate. She said, "What mattered, perhaps, was that we were caring and knew how to behave and were thus able to generate more confidence among the local people than men. The Liberian women didn't hesitate to come to us since *we understood their issues as well as that of the children* [emphasis in original]."<sup>62</sup>

## GENDER DIVERSITY IS NOT ENOUGH

Scholars have criticized the two potential mechanisms, namely, a critical mass of women reducing misconduct and women deterring men's potential misconduct, for their essentializing gender views.<sup>63</sup> Arguments for both mechanisms rest, explicitly or implicitly, on assumptions that women are more peaceful either because of innate characteristics or because of their socialization. Echoing the FFPU commander's comment, others have suggested that women's "gentle

FIGURE 2.

## Gender Distribution of Troops in Current UN Peacekeeping Missions (March 2020)



Source: United Nations Peacekeeping, “Troop and Police Contributions,” <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>.

nature” and “conciliatory attitude” enable them to control aggression and resolve conflicts, making them effective peacekeepers unlikely to engage in sexual exploitation and abuse.<sup>64</sup> Such arguments are problematic because connecting the lower percentage of female—as compared to male—peacekeepers who perpetrate sexual exploitation and abuse to women’s supposedly asexual and peaceful nature is inaccurate. It also reinforces gender stereotypes and entrenches gender inequality within missions.<sup>65</sup>

Including women peacekeepers in missions does not transform existing patriarchal beliefs and structures within the national militaries deployed or the wider UN system. Reports indicate that female peacekeepers face gendered constraints during their deployment, which may include being seen as more vulnerable than male peacekeepers and confined to the base for protection. One senior official in Liberia, when asked about female peacekeepers, noted he had been told “not to let his girls out” during the mission.<sup>66</sup> Any positive or neutralizing aspect women peacekeepers may have on sexual exploitation and abuse is further blunted by the pre-existing patriarchal structures of the military and peacekeeping systems in which female soldiers themselves frequently endure sexual assault.<sup>67</sup>



The expectation that women peacekeepers can help prevent sexual exploitation and abuse by policing male peacekeepers' behavior is also problematic. It creates an impossible situation in which women are expected to perform better than their male counterparts across several dimensions and to somehow prevent men from committing sexual abuse, all while facing gender discrimination and harassment themselves.<sup>68</sup> In addition, it lets men off the hook.<sup>69</sup> It allows men's misconduct to persist as somehow quasi-inevitable, while women are tasked with dealing with the consequences. This creates further burdens for female peacekeepers.

There is some evidence that male soldiers' behavior improves when they are in gender-mixed units.<sup>70</sup> However, the expectation that female peacekeepers will police their male colleagues' sexual treatment of civilian populations assumes they will side with local women based on their gender. This is an unreasonable assumption in light of the many potential religious, national, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic barriers separating women peacekeepers and local women.<sup>71</sup> In examining the relationship between Liberian women and the Indian FFPU, Marsha Henry points out the limits of shared womanhood: "Global class categories feature to reinforce ideas about difference between the peacekeepers and the local women over potential shared understandings and experiences of gender."<sup>72</sup> Expecting otherwise also assumes that "womanhood" is a bond that outweighs intra-unit cohesion, loyalty, and the shared military socialization process that male and female peacekeepers go through.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, it neglects the fact that policing male colleagues' behavior requires women to take on considerable risk. As of 2019, women accounted for only 6 percent of uniformed peacekeepers.<sup>74</sup> This means that, instead of asking men—the overwhelming majority of uniformed peacekeepers—to prevent these violations by themselves and other men, the UN places the burden on a small minority of women. This is both illogical from a numerical perspective and potentially dangerous, as exposed perpetrators or their friends in the contingent might retaliate against women who report their misconduct. Consequently, it should not be a surprise that increasing the number of women in peacekeeping forces is not a viable means to prevent and end sexual abuse by peacekeepers.

Rather than simply adding women peacekeepers, the culture of peacekeeping must be addressed. Karim and Beardsley have demonstrated that military contingents from countries with better records of gender equality also experience lower levels of reported sexual exploitation and abuse allegations.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, Stephen Moncrief's research reveals that disciplinary breakdowns among low-level commanders is associated with increased rates of allegations of sexual misconduct.<sup>76</sup> These studies make it clear that a mission culture that values gender equality and discipline may be key to addressing this issue, rather than whether a peacekeeper is male or female.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Each of the measures taken to reduce sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers—zero tolerance policies, criminalization and accountability protocols, the implementation of gender and sexual exploitation and abuse training, increasing the number of female peacekeepers—is associated with unique barriers that hinder its efficacy. All, however, share a failure to address systemic factors that underpin sexual exploitation and abuse.

Strong press freedom in troop-contributing and host countries has been linked to less sexual exploitation and abuse and can play a powerful role in promoting accountability for violations.

Each of the responses primarily treats sexual exploitation and abuse as an isolated issue stemming from the behavior of individuals. Prevention efforts, however, must first situate the issue within larger UN frameworks, such as the WPS agenda. Doing so places sexual violations by peacekeepers within the broader context of gender issues, including gender-based violence and gender inequality.

Prevention efforts must also engage with inequalities linked to gender, racism, colonial legacies, and global economic and power relations, which underpin the perpetration of sexual exploitation and abuse and hamper subsequent responses. This engagement must be structural and take place at multiple levels, including the organizational level (the UN), the national level (troop-contributing and host countries), and military or police units. The power dynamics of peacekeeping missions must also be scrutinized, including the dynamics between Global North funders and Global South troop-contributing countries and between peacekeepers and host-country populations. It is important that policies intended to address sexual exploitation and abuse prevention be situated within a broader commitment to transform the structural dynamics of inequality that lead to environments tolerant of or enabling sexual abuse.

To more effectively prevent sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers, we propose the following policy recommendations at both the UN and national levels. Because the current coronavirus pandemic may change the rotation schedule, duration of deployments, and number of peacekeepers deployed to assist governments and local communities, now is an auspicious time to begin implementing change.

**Provide both more standardized and more specific training.** Gender and sexual exploitation and abuse training must be mandatory and standardized to ensure peacekeepers have a baseline knowledge. Both predeployment and in-mission training must be contextualized to the troop-contributing country and the host country, and should also be further tailored to the unique roles of the peacekeepers being trained. Training must engage with the norms and socialization that underpin these violations not just among peacekeeping forces but also at the broader national military level. The UN should allocate funding for national military-wide training on this issue for the militaries that supply large numbers of peacekeepers.

**Establish gender and sexual exploitation and abuse training benchmarks.** In addition to mandating that troop-contributing countries complete predeployment training, the UN should develop training benchmarks that must be met prior to deployment. The UN should also provide financial and technical support for predeployment training in instances where there is a lack of capacity to meet set benchmarks.

**Provide mission-level survivor assistance.** Currently, the UN provides support for victims and survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse through select programs in three countries through the Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. We propose that this approach be expanded, and that each mission budget include a fund to support survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse.

**Mandate sexual exploitation and abuse prevention as part of the UN's women, peace, and security agenda.** Any attempt to achieve long-term prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse must begin by addressing the root causes and structural inequalities that enable it, which will require promoting gender equality in troop-contributing countries. Efforts to address sexual violations by peacekeepers should be situated within larger UN frameworks, such as the WPS agenda. The UN should accept peacekeepers only from countries that have a National Action Plan that demonstrates a commitment to the WPS agenda and includes specific provisions and actionable items to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse.

**Improve data collection, management, and transparency.** To better inform and track zero tolerance policies, the UN must ensure the collection of accurate data on sexual exploitation and abuse. Data must be clearly operationalized and individual allegations separately accounted for. Data collection and management must be carried out systematically and applied across all peacekeeping operations, including past missions. A simple first step is to make data available in formats that are usable (e.g., CSV, Excel, or Stata DTA). Currently, data on sexual exploitation and abuse allegations are only available for download in file formats (image, PDF, or PowerPoint) that impede rather than facilitate comprehensive analyses.

**Strengthen reporting procedures.** The UN should work to increase local outreach in host countries to ensure that civilians understand they can report sexual exploitation and abuse without reprisal and that they know how to report incidents. Prevention and data collection responsibilities should be tasked to separate bodies to improve accountability and oversight.

**Strengthen press freedom.** Strong press freedom in troop-contributing and host countries has been linked to less sexual exploitation and abuse and can play a powerful role in promoting accountability for violations. The UN should bolster press freedom by encouraging member states to adopt legislation protecting press freedom through the provision of workshops and training sessions for local journalists in both troop-contributing and host countries and the development of communication channels between peacekeeping missions and journalists.

None of the foregoing recommendations will suffice by itself to remediate the problem of peacekeepers' sexual abuse and exploitation of civilian populations. Long-term prevention strategies that begin in troop-contributing countries would, however, significantly enhance the UN's current reaction-based efforts and broaden its approach beyond a primary focus on discipline and punish measures.

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