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Unsupported: The Needs and Rights of Children Fathered by UN Peacekeepers in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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Abstract

Sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by United Nations (UN) peacekeepers causes severe physical and psychological consequences. Where SEA leads to pregnancy and childbirth, peacekeepers typically absolve themselves of their paternal responsibilities and paternity suits are largely unsuccessful. The lack of support for peacekeeper-fathered children (PKFC) tarnishes the image of the UN who fails to implement a victim-centred approach to SEA. Analysing shortcomings in the provision of support, this article presents an evaluation of the UN's accountability system from the perspective of PKFC families. In-depth interviews with thirty-five PKFC and sixty mothers demonstrate local barriers to child support and paternity claims in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. We discuss PKFC's need for assistance and their mothers' attempts to navigate an opaque international legal system. The findings cast light on their limited access to UN subsidies and offer recommendations to better implement existing UN goals of justice and victim-oriented policies.

Keywords Sexual exploitation and abuse · United Nations peacekeeping · Paternity · Democratic Republic of Congo · Victim support · Peacekeeper-fathered children

Introduction

“MONUSCO needs to assist us. They can't reject us, especially since we are the products of what our fathers did when they were working for them.” (PKFC, Kisangani).

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United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations (PKOs) are an effective tool for promoting and maintaining international peace and security (Hegre et al. 2019). As of February 2021, twelve PKOs are deployed to support political peace amidst violence and insecurity in conflict settings around the world. While most missions play a critical role in containing conflict, they also produce a range of unintended consequences (Aoi et al. 2007). Sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), in particular, has surfaced as an endemic problem during PKOs that undermines the UNs' efforts to protect civilians (Westendorf and Searle 2017). Deployed in areas of extreme poverty, the relative affluence of peacekeepers compared to civilians—many of whom are struggling to survive—creates power imbalances that increase the vulnerability of local populations, particularly women and girls, to SEA (Shotton 2006). The breakdown of community structure and lack of basic necessities in countries of UN peacekeeping (UNPK) deployment has been found to drive civilians to seek out relationships with peacekeepers¹ or to trade sex in exchange for food, shelter, money, or other goods (Nordås and Rustad 2013). Where sexual relations lead to pregnancy, peacekeepers are often redeployed elsewhere or repatriated from host state communities before their children are born (Blau 2016).² Since civilians are already fighting existential problems, children left behind by peacekeepers have been shown to substantially weaken the economic security of their families (Lee and Bartels 2019; Wagner et al. 2020). The Special Advisor of the UN Secretary General (SG), Prince Zeid Raad Al-Hussein, acknowledged in 2005 that “many victims, especially those who have “peacekeeper babies” and have been abandoned by the fathers, are in desperate financial situation[s]” (UN General Assembly 2005, 25).

Notwithstanding the challenges faced by mothers and children, limited progress has been made with economic and social reparations (Ferstman 2019). Peacekeeper-fathered children (PKFC), in particular, have little agency in matters of assistance since they are often too young to demand compensation themselves and have little to no information about their fathers (Blau 2016; DeLaet 2007). Moreover, their “victim status”³ is entangled with that of their mothers, presenting a new form of victimhood that poses challenges to traditional models of justice (Baines and Oliveira 2020). In this article, we will discuss the situation of PKFC in host state communities and explore their rights under UN policies and international frameworks for support. We will do so by centring the voices of mothers who conceived children with peacekeepers and the children born of these relations. To our knowledge, this is the first study to present the views of PKFC families regarding UN programming to enhance the delivery of justice for victims. Based on the experiences of mothers

¹ Allegations of SEA have also been reported in relation to humanitarian and development personnel, military contractors, as well as charities that deliver aid independently of the UN or as implementation partners.

² While the focus of this article is on children born of SEA, children may also be conceived through more consensual and equal partnerships (Simić and O'Brien 2014).

³ For the purpose of this study, we follow the official UN terminology in referring to those who have experienced SEA as “victims”, rather than “survivors”. Although not victims of SEA in the traditional sense, PKFC are integrated in the UN protocol for support of victims, and thus, we consider them victims in discussing strategies for assistance.

and PKFC in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), we will discuss “what works” in terms of victim assistance and whether recent changes in UN policy towards a victim-oriented approach to SEA and paternity have in fact benefitted those on whose behalf they were implemented. In doing so, we argue that an evaluation of the UN’s accountability system by victims⁴ is crucial for understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the mechanisms in place to support them (Tamarit et al. 2010). Our work makes several key contributions to the ongoing academic and policy debates on sexual misconduct at the hands of UN peacekeepers, by (1) presenting the concerns of mothers and PKFC, (2) outlining local barriers to child support and paternity claims and, (3) portraying victims’ demands regarding the reorientation of existing policies to meet the UN’s stated goals.

We start by outlining the UN’s response to SEA and childbirth and providing contextual information on the DRC, where the field research for this study was conducted. We then demonstrate the gaps in UN protocols for assistance based on the experiences of thirty-five PKFC and sixty mothers, and finally discuss policy considerations to improve their access to support services.

Responding to the Needs of Victims

Securing compensation and assistance for victims of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) are basic principles of reconciling conflict-torn societies (UN General Assembly 1985). Perpetrated by UN peacekeepers, SEA occurs within the broader context of SGBV but is unique given the particular authority and status of PKOs. Although the principle of victim care and well-being applies, the UN—who does not have its own criminal justice system—depends on member states to enforce justice and accountability.

While improving the procedures involved in mitigating the harmful effects of SEA for victims is now considered a priority, historically, UN policy and programming regarding SEA-related issues have often overlooked the severely deficient mechanisms for their assistance. From the 1990s when SEA was first addressed as a serious concern both in the academic and political discourse, the emphasis was on the perpetrators, and the key concerns were to understand better the nature of SEA, the reasons for the systematic perpetration of sexual offences by peacekeepers and the cultural factors contributing to SEA (Nordås and Rustad 2013; Freedman 2018). As a result, significant attention was devoted to the prevention of future misconduct and comparatively little to helping existing victims overcome the physical, psychological and social effects of SEA (Ferstman 2019). In 2003, the UN announced “zero tolerance” towards SEA and adopted “special measures for protection” (UN Secretariat 2003). Since then, most sexual relations between UNPK personnel and beneficiaries of assistance are classified as exploitative or abusive, due to an assumed imbalance of power. Framed by the 2003 bulletin, sexual abuse refers to

⁴ This paper focuses on pathways of assistance from the victims’ perspective; an in-depth analysis of international laws and regulations that cause impunity is outside of the scope of this article.

sexual relations with minors under eighteen or sexual acts inflicted in a forced or coercive manner, while sexual exploitation refers to sexual relations that involve “a level of agency and negotiation” but occur in a coercive environment (UN Secretariat 2003; Otto 2007, 260). Sexual exploitation includes “transactional sex” and “sexually exploitative relationships” which thrive on vulnerability and are therefore also prohibited (UN General Assembly 2017; Conduct in UN Field Missions 2020b). In spite of increasingly comprehensive policies aimed at preventing sexual misconduct, SEA allegations have continued to proliferate in the peacekeeping context.⁵

While the international community has prioritized issues around prevention, reforms to improve accountability have centralized punitive justice and again, undermined the rights of victims to effective remedies (Burke 2014; Mudgway 2016). Nonetheless, still only a fraction of implicated peacekeepers are prosecuted or convicted which discourages victims from pursuing compensation through judicial procedures (Kovatch 2016). Political and structural barriers create jurisdictional limitations that complicate the accountability processes through agreements that grant each category of UN personnel their own set of immunities and disciplinary measures (Blau 2016). UN officials, civilian staff and experts on mission for whom the primary jurisdiction to investigate and prosecute SEA falls with the country where the alleged criminal act occurred benefit from functional immunity for actions undertaken while in official UN capacity (UN Treaty Series 1946). Although the SG can waive immunity for UN staff accused of committing serious crimes, SEA often takes place in countries with failed judicial systems that may not be able or willing to prosecute offenders and thus, using this leverage is often ineffective (Miller 2007). Under the domestic law of host countries, fathers may be required to pay child support for children they abandon. However, purported fathers often live in a different jurisdiction beyond the reach of host state courts. Without UN cooperation,⁶ mothers have no realistic prospect of recovering maintenance payments across borders since few host states have joined international conventions such as the “Hague Convention on the International Recovery of Child Support and Other Forms of Family Maintenance” that would enable court systems to enforce judgments in another country (Lee 2017; Simić and O’Brien 2014).

In relation to military contingents, the Status-of-Forces Agreement (SOFA) and the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) determine that only troop-contributing countries (TCCs) can prosecute misconduct (UN General Assembly 1990, 2011). This means that uniformed personnel are not subject to sanctions by the UN or host state, but that the responsibility to investigate SEA lies with peacekeepers’ countries of origin (Simm 2013). Where PKFC were born as a result of SEA, member states are required to pursue paternity claims under the national legal system of the purported father (Conduct in UN Field Missions 2020a). The deputy spokesperson for the UN SG elaborated that the responsibility for child support rests with individual peacekeepers since “compensation is a matter of personal accountability” (UN

⁵ See Neudorfer (2014) for a detailed analysis of risk and prevention factors.

⁶ This represents an additional legal barrier for PKFC born of consensual sexual relations for whom the UN does currently not facilitate legal action.

Meetings Coverage and Press Releases 2017). This proves challenging, however. TCCs are often reluctant to follow up on claims regarding their own nationals or lack resources to do so, making it impossible for victims to access assistance through legal institutions (Vandenberg 2017). Sometimes acts constituting SEA according to the UN definition do not constitute a criminal offence under the national legislation of TCCs and cannot be penalized in local courts (Mandrup and Cold-Ravnkilde 2017). Bound by the SOFA and MoU, the UN's role in advancing paternity and child support claims is restricted to coordinating with member states and facilitating DNA testing where national legislation permits it (UN General Assembly 2015). In 2015, the UN documented a response rate from TCCs regarding paternity matters of only 20%⁷ (UN General Assembly 2015). Notwithstanding the organization's efforts to translate its policies into constructive action, in practice UN policies for child support have largely failed to assist PKFC. Despite the UN's intentions to end impunity, there is still a critical legal accountability gap and numerous barriers for victims of SEA to realize their rights.

Questioning the appropriateness of trials as a path to justice, more recent scholarship has promoted restorative justice and social repair (DeLaet 2007; Freedman 2018). Aligning with better-informed ideals of justice, public attention shifted towards creating a greater understanding of the needs of SEA victims, including mothers and those born as a result of SEA. The UN publicly acknowledged PKFC in 2008 with the adoption of a "Comprehensive Strategy on Assistance and Support for Victims" that considered children born to peacekeepers amongst those directly affected by SEA (UN General Assembly 2008). According to the strategy, complainants (individuals who reported SEA) were entitled to basic assistance, e.g. emergency medical care, and victims (individuals whose complaints were verified) were entitled to additional reparative support.⁸ Children born as a result of SEA were to receive "assistance and support addressing the medical, psychological and social consequences directly arising from sexual exploitation and abuse, in the best interests of the child" (UN General Assembly 2008, 4). Moreover, all those affected could request "immediate material care, such as food, clothing, emergency and safe shelter". The implementation of the outlined response, however, depended on the availability of local services that often had not been allocated adequate UN funding (Mudgway 2016).⁹ Although aid was guaranteed to all "children who are found by a competent national authority to have been born as a result of acts of SEA" (UN General Assembly 2008, 3), the number of individuals who have received concrete

⁷ Although the resolution of paternity and child support claims has increased significantly in recent years, important information on investigations and accountability measures taken by member states remains pending, see UN General Assembly (2020).

⁸ The distinction between "complainant" and "victim" was dropped in the 2019 Victim Assistance Protocol.

⁹ Instead of offering compensation through the UN, the comprehensive strategy refers accountability to assailants and their home countries, emphasising the individual liability of perpetrators (UN General Assembly 2008). In providing intermediary assistance, it relied on existing in-country entities for victims of sexual violence, stating that "[t]he nature and scope of the assistance to be provided is determined on a case-by-case basis and depends on the services which are locally available to other GBV survivors" (ECHA/ECPS UN and NGO Task Force on Protection from SEA 2009, 6).

assistance is extremely small (Office of Internal Oversight Services 2015; Bureau des Avocats Internationaux 2019a).

Since 2004, the effectiveness of structural and operational policies on protection from SEA has been discussed annually in a SG report. Prompted by shortcomings regarding victim assistance that were highlighted in the 2015 report, SG Ban Ki-moon established the Trust Fund in Support of Victims (hereafter “Trust Fund”) in 2016 to address service gaps in the provision of support (UN General Assembly 2016). Designed to support relevant in-country entities in providing specialized services to victims, the Trust Fund does not provide financial compensation to individual victims but funding to organizations who offer, for instance, rehabilitative and transformative opportunities to beneficiaries (UN Peacekeeping 2020). In 2017, SG António Guterres outlined a “new approach” to victim support, anchored in the creation of a new position within the UN—the Victims’ Rights Advocate (VRA). The first VRA, Jane Connors, seeks to reinforce a victim-centred, rights-based approach to SEA, embodying the new momentum and seriousness with which the organization aims to remove barriers to assistance for victims (Connors 2020). Additional Field VRAs have been designated as the “main contact for victims on the ground” (Connors 2020, 503). An updated protocol on victim assistance endorsed in December 2019 represents the organization’s evolution in the provision of support since 2008 and aspires to be “age, disability-and gender sensitive, non-discriminatory and culturally appropriate” (UN Protocol 2019). Consequently, victims have the right to choose between a range of options for assistance, amongst them education and professional support. Despite its stated victim-centred approach, building effective capacity and avenues for assistance remains challenging. Haitian attorneys who published a series of letters to the VRA after filing paternity suits for ten PKFC in 2015 have suggested that protocols may still not be implemented as proposed (Bureau des Avocats Internationaux 2019a, 2019b, 2020). The legal team argued that years after initiating legal action, no child support claim has resulted in sustained assistance and the UN allegedly remained “non-responsive, non-cooperative and opaque in its approach, failing to provide essential evidentiary documentation and adequate and transparent assistance to clients”. (Bureau des Avocats Internationaux 2019b, 1). The UN thus continues to be perceived as failing to uphold its obligation to facilitate paternity claims, ensure child support and comply with their own standards of transparency.

The 2019 protocol on assistance states that the views of children are a “significant factor in the settlement” of victim-related issues, yet very little is known about their interests or perspectives (UN Protocol 2019, 6). Through the prism of the ongoing PKO in the DRC, the present study seeks to explore their needs and rights.

PKFC in DRC

Systematic evidence on PKFC conceived during the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO, formerly MONUC) is limited, although a broad spectrum of journalistic and anecdotal testimonies account for their existence. In 2005, reports emerged about 141 females who had conceived children with

Moroccan and Uruguayan peacekeepers (The Weekend Australian 2005). Shortly afterwards, news outlets highlighted “mounting concern that large numbers of peacekeeper babies” were being abandoned (Lynch 2005). In 2016, allegations surfaced against eleven Tanzanian peacekeepers facing paternity claims and Aljazeera broadcasted a story about hundreds of PKFC in the Ituri province (Bryan 2016; Essa 2017). Meanwhile, the UN’s Misconduct Tracking System (MTS)—a system-wide database that tracks allegations of vetted misconduct filed against peacekeepers—recorded 266 victims of SEA in DRC between 2010 and 2020, of which 101 implicated peacekeeping personnel in child support or paternity claims (Conduct in UN Field Missions 2020b). These numbers are considered underestimates because of the barriers victims face in filing complaints (Grady 2016).¹⁰ The UN’s Deputy-Chief of Conduct and Discipline Services addressed this complexity: “You cannot expect a woman living in the middle of Congo, for example, to be able to file a claim for recognition of paternity, and then child support, in a court on another continent” (Bracken 2014). To date only eight of the 101 filed paternity claims have been confirmed; all others are pending or were rejected (Conduct in UN Field Missions 2020b).

Methods

The study is derived from a wider mixed-methods research project addressing peacekeeper-civilian interactions in eastern DRC with data collected between May and August 2018.¹¹ In the larger study, the narrative-capture tool SenseMaker® was used to collect micronarratives from 2856 community members regarding interactions between UN peacekeepers and local women and girls (Wagner et al. 2020). Women who shared first-person accounts about conceiving and giving birth to a PKFC were invited to participate in a follow-up qualitative interview. Snowball sampling was used to increase sample size, with participating mothers of PKFC inviting other women who were raising PKFC, as well as their children to also take part in the study. From this dataset, we present interviews with sixty mothers and thirty-five PKFC using a convenience sample. Data collection was concentrated in towns and villages up to 30 km perimeter of six UN bases in eastern DRC: Goma, Bukavu, Kalemí, Beni, Bunia and Kisangani. The interview locations were chosen strategically according to UN base size, nationality of base staffing, date of operation, regional influence and geographic variation.

¹⁰ Although contributing to greater transparency, the MTS has been criticised for being subject to significant fluctuations due to changes in policies, reporting and taxonomies (Grady 2016). Since 2015, the published information includes the nationality of uniformed personnel, the type of allegation, whether a paternity claim was filed, whether paternity was established, the status and duration of the investigation and actions undertaken to hold perpetrators to account (Conduct in UN Field Missions 2020b). The database does not track children born to peacekeepers of consensual sexual relations and no information regarding how many PKFC are receiving support and what that support looks like have been made public, indicating the UN’s lack of transparency in reporting and analysing paternity.

¹¹ For more information on the study design and larger research project see Wagner et al. (2020).

Since issues related to SEA and childbirth have not been extensively researched in the past, interviews followed an exploratory-descriptive approach, employing semi-structured questionnaires. All interview guides were self-constructed with topic questions and prompts addressing, inter alia, participants' needs for assistance and support received from peacekeeper fathers, state representatives, UN authorities and/or non-governmental organizations. Depending on the group of participants interviewed, we used a mix of semi-structured interviews and participatory visual research to explore their experiences. Interview guides for two age groups of PKFC were employed to adapt the style and detail of questions to their respective cognitive and emotional development. Accordingly, interviews with younger children (aged six to twelve) were designed with a few, open-ended questions that encouraged them to talk about their situations under playful conditions including drawing their family units and responding to a series of photographs. Representing a nuanced, yet sensitive tool to gain insight into children's psychology, these tasks were anticipated to invoke comments about PKFC's living situations without explicitly mentioning their heritage (Mitchell 2008). This served to mitigate potential risks for children to find out undisclosed information about their fathers and reduced the risks involved in interviewing very young children. Interviews with adolescents (aged thirteen to nineteen) contained more direct questions regarding their family's circumstances. The duration of each interview was determined by the participant's openness and willingness with which information was provided. Non-directive probes facilitated structure while the flexible, open-ended questioning ensured that participants were in control of the shared information. Two social workers from the women's rights organization *Solidarité Féminine pour la Paix et le Développement Intégral* (SOFEPADI) who had experience working with vulnerable populations carried out the interviews. They were fluent in local languages and completed a five-day training on research ethics, data management and collecting data with young people prior to the study. All participants gave informed oral consent to participate and to have the anonymous results published. Participation was informed in an age-appropriate manner, targeted to children, adolescents and adults. PKFC younger than six were excluded due to ethical concerns and them not being capable communicators in the context of this study. Parental consent for the participation of minors was obtained from mothers during their interviews. PKFC were only then interviewed if their mothers stated clearly that they were aware of their paternal background. Written consent was waived due to the low level of risk associated with non-invasive questioning, anticipated levels of literacy and local cultural norms. Interviews were conducted privately; no identifying information was taken, and no compensation was offered. The local partner, SOFEPADI, created a support system for participants in need of social services or legal advice and gave out referral cards with contact numbers in closing each interview session. Given their cultural, linguistic and content expertise, the study relied on the guidance of SOFEPADI to ensure that the research was designed and implemented in a culturally sensitive manner. The study protocol was approved by the institutional review

boards of Queen's University (6019042), the University of Birmingham (ERN_18-0083; ERN_17-1715; ERN_17-1715A) and the Congolese National Committee of Health Ethics (CNES 001/DP-SK/119PM/2018).

Interviews were conducted in Lingala, Kiswahili and occasionally in French, recorded and transcribed by Congolese research staff. Qualitative thematic coding was applied by identifying data themes through open coding. Emerging concepts were summarized under the categories "needs" and "assistance". Categories for codes describing the needs of mothers and PKFC were chosen based on frequency and consistency across narratives to reflect the situation of most participants. Categories for codes describing attempts at seeking assistance and subsequent service provision were further based on novelty and theoretical saturation to portray the scope of individual experiences.¹² Representative quotes were chosen to illustrate themes.

Results

Participants implicated UN personnel from twelve countries in fathering and abandoning children, the majority of whom were Tanzanian and South African. Mothers who recalled the position of fathers at MONUSCO said they were soldiers, lieutenants, sergeants, pilots, drivers, mechanics, cooks, doctors or photographers. Of the mothers who indicated their age at conception, 50% were under the age of eighteen and the youngest girl impregnated was ten. This adds to the troubling picture of very young girls being sexually abused by peacekeepers and confronted prematurely with the responsibilities of motherhood (Lee and Bartels 2019). At the time of the interviews in 2018, the mean age of mothers was 26.2 ($SD=7.2$) and the average age of interviewed youth was 12 ($SD=3.6$), with a range of six to nineteen. Accordingly, the majority of PKFC in the study were born after implementation of the zero tolerance and other related policies. However, four PKFC were born before 2003 when the UN did not yet have a clear stance regarding sexual relations with beneficiaries of assistance.

All mothers described being left with little to no assistance after peacekeeper fathers were transferred or repatriated. Most mothers engaged with peacekeepers out of necessity in exchange for money, food and other basic goods. Their need for "survival sex" indicates that PKFC were raised by mothers from very poor backgrounds who lacked family support. Half of the mothers ($N=30$) stated clearly whether they had reported paternity to UN officials. Out of those, 13% had not contacted MONUSCO authorities and 63% indicated that their complaint was ignored or rejected, while 23% described an initial investigation or legal case, but no participant had been awarded compensation.

We present the data in two sections. The first section illustrates the needs of victims, specifies which forms of assistance they requested, and which types of

¹² PKFC were not asked about their families attempts of pursuing assistance, thus, their interviews could not be coded regarding those issues.

assistance were available at the time of interview. The second section describes obstacles to assistance including barriers to reporting, compensation and specialized services financed by the Trust Fund.

Needs Assessment and Analysis

Individual Needs

The group of ninety-five participants interviewed is distinct from the general population in eastern DRC in terms of their economic and social circumstances. Qualitative thematic analysis revealed that participants lived in circumstances of extreme poverty. Despite varying degrees of financial exigency, all seemed to lack basic resources. This has been summarized under the theme “suffering”, a term used by many participants to describe their living situation. We have identified key sectors of resource scarcity that appeared to have significant impact on participants’ livelihoods.

Food Insecurity Most mothers and PKFC described food insecurity that regularly prevented them from eating two or three meals a day. They suffered from insufficient funds to buy basic ingredients like vegetables, rice, tea and oil. Mothers demonstrated their need for urgent remedies to feed their families, particularly the PKFC, who in some instances were denied access to available household resources (Wagner et al. 2020).

“My family goes through much pain to find the amount of food we need daily. Sometimes, when we get about 1000 Congolese Franks [0.5 USD], we thank God for it, but we never get full or satiated with the little food we have. On many occasions, we go to bed without having eaten anything” (PKFC, Bukavu).

Lack of Health Care The interviews suggest that some PKFC might face chronic malnutrition and other health deficiencies due to undernourishment. Moreover, mothers described not being able to afford an examination or treatment when their children developed more serious illnesses. This puts PKFC at risk for long-term health and development issues.

“My status doesn’t really reflect that of a respectable person, my child is deprived of everything: lotion, soap, clothes, and food. Nobody can really believe that this is the child of a MONUSCO agent, it doesn’t have a decent living standard. Even his health has degraded due to bad living conditions. When he is sick, I am in trouble because I don’t have the means to pay for healthcare.” (Mother, Bukavu).

Poor Sanitation Participants’ restricted access to health care was aggravated by their inability to purchase cleaning and hygiene products like soap. PKFC complained about the need for personal care products and expressed a fear that they would “look dirty”.

“I have no body lotion, not even the local palm oil or soap to wash my face.” (PKFC, Bukavu).

Precarious Housing Inappropriate housing, lack of money to pay rent or afford a plot of land to build shelter on was another serious concern. Participants described structural problems with houses, inadequate maintenance and lack of lamp oil and clean sheets. A small fraction of participants indicated homelessness.

“That guy from MONUSCO is living peacefully with his wife and children while my house is leaking, and the sheets are overused. Basically, he destroyed my life when getting me pregnant. He deceived me and now my life is crammed with suffering, impending hardships.” (Mother, Kalemi).

Inadequate Clothing Interviewees also had grievances regarding their appearance and inability to buy the desired clothes and footwear. In line with existing research, the data suggests that clothes were not only perceived as a necessity but contributed to defining social status (Boyette et al. 2018). PKFC’s inability to afford clothing drew attention to their father’s absence.

“When I think of the deep poverty I’m in, I feel much despair. I am dressed poorly. I have no good clothes. I have no shoes, no flip-flops either. You can see that what I am wearing is completely torn apart.” (PKFC, Bukavu).

Compromised Education PKFC overwhelmingly indicated their struggle to afford tuition fees, school supplies, uniforms and other costs related to their education. Many were schooled infrequently and skipped certain months or grades, significantly impacting their future prospects and life courses. Uncovered expenses and the obligation to work to supplement the household income often prompted PKFC to drop out of school.

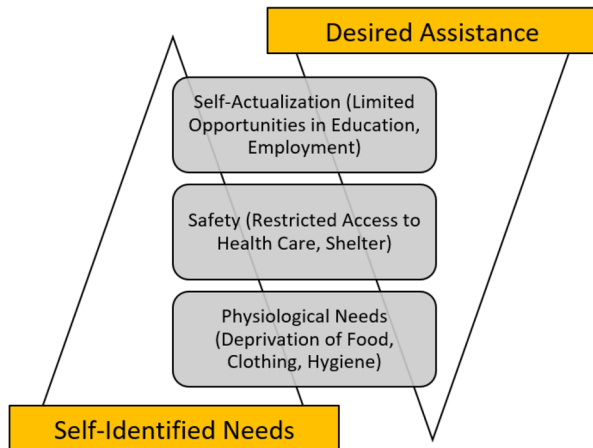
“We are always short on money which is why I have not been able to attend sixth form primary school. At that time, I fell sick in the middle of the school year and because of the lack of money, left school forever. I no longer go there. I have no idea about MONUSCO agents really, but I do not like them because they don’t pay our school-fees, they do nothing for us.” (PKFC, Bukavu).

Unviable Employment Similar circumstances applied to mothers whose professional opportunities were often severely compromised. Child rearing costs that exacerbated poverty compelled some mothers to exchange sex for goods that ensured their child’s survival. This “downward spiral” or chain of SEA has previously been reported for victims in DRC (Notar 2006) and Haiti (Lee and Bartels 2019).

“My concerns are about the living conditions of the child as I am jobless and penniless. Currently, I’m struggling to get food for the child’s survival. I am living a strange life when I meet fellows in the bush who go to fetch fire sticks so that we can have the child’s soap or body milk. I think much about the child’s father for I think that if he was living with me, I would be free from hardships.” (Mother, Goma).

The critical needs expressed in the interviews illustrate the extreme poverty in eastern DRC, as well as the impact of absent fathers in patriarchal settings and of low socio-economic means. Most mothers made a clear distinction between their financial situation pre- and post-childbirth; thus, single parenting aggravated their already dire socio-economic conditions. In order to ascertain family quality of life

Fig. 1 Relationship between individual needs and desired forms of assistance



in the Congolese context, the number of meals a family eats per day, their ability to send children to school, and their access to health care are appropriate measurements to classify living standards (Aldersey et al. 2017). Based on this, families with PKFC must be considered highly vulnerable in a country-wide comparison. The disproportionate “suffering” of PKFC families prompts the moral and political urgency of assistance.

Desired Assistance

Study participants expected the UN to provide assistance when the UN peacekeeper fathers did not. They discussed what aid they needed and how support could be most effectively targeted. Despite struggling with basic daily expenses, few participants asked for immediate alleviation of their most pressing needs. Instead, they requested forward-looking assistance in the form of education, employment, land or housing (see Fig. 1). Mothers assumed that the lack of paternal family connections and inheritance would restrict PKFC’s access to resources in the long-term, and thus desired structural support to increase their children’s prospects.

“I wonder what to give to the child when he is grown up. A handsome child should have a plot of land, a house, a farm, so I need a job that enables me to give goods to him. All assistance is welcome. My main expectation, however, is work, as it will help to better our living conditions in the long-term.” (Mother, Goma).

Employment Many mothers were the sole caretakers and providers for their children, but without earning subsistence wages. They often worked long hours in informal jobs, unable to spend time with their children or cover their existential needs. Several mothers operated “small businesses” selling goods like vegetables to enhance income, hoping to later invest in products with a larger profit; thus, they were looking to expand their commercial activity. Others hoped vocational training

could improve their chances of employment. Participants saw capacity-building for income generation as a way to ensure their child's survival and guard them against recurrent SEA, and a way out of poverty that would improve their family's quality of life.

"I sometimes buy potatoes, cook them and sell them at the market or on sidewalks. People buy things like this from me and in return I get the soap to wash my child's clothes. If they gave me money, I could trade and expand my selling business. Through this work, I might be able to avoid selling my body—to have sex for money in order to buy soap, clothes, food and so on." (Mother, Kalemi).

Education Most PKFC asked for funding towards their education to better their chances of employment and pathways to a productive and independent future. They directed their claims equally to absent fathers and MONUSCO authorities as they considered both to have an obligation in supporting and assisting them.

"He was supporting us a little bit but these days we are not receiving any support from him that is why I am not going to school this year. I sell water around the city in order to be able to survive." (PKFC, Kisangani).

Housing/Land Being provided with appropriate housing or a plot of land to grow food or build a compound on was another commonly requested form of assistance that was perceived to ensure PKFC's safety and inheritance.

"If someone could give me my own house, I would be the happiest person in the world. Feeding my son, dressing him etc. are difficult but the biggest problem for which I wish MONUSCO could find a solution is housing, having my own compound. My son will want to know where our house is for sure." (Mother, Bukavu).

Infrequently, participants were granted help from other institutions, community groups, faith-based or non-governmental organizations. They reported that civil society actors like "Médecins sans frontières", "The Red Cross" and "Heal Africa" assisted them with free health care and legal complaints, whereas MONUSCO did not.

Barriers to Assistance

In spite of the needs outlined above, accessing official support through the UN was unrealistic for many mothers for several reasons, including barriers to reporting the SEA in the first place.

Barriers to Reporting

Mothers identified multiple barriers to reporting paternity to the UN, amongst them (i) lack of credible evidence, (ii) unclear complaint pathways, (iii) misinformation, (iv) change in policies, (v) lack of confidence in authorities, (vi) fear of negative consequences and (vii) the expectation of resilience.

Lack of Credible Evidence Mothers indicated that they did not have peacekeeper identifying information to support their allegations and confirm their victim status. Identifying perpetrators was considered to be dependent on knowledge of the country flags and numbers written on military uniforms. This perceived requirement prevented mothers who had sexual relations with civilian peacekeepers, or military personnel who did not regularly wear their uniforms, from seeking paternity support. Similarly, victims of sexual abuse and sex-work were less likely to report incidents of SEA since they often did not have details about the implicated peacekeeper.

“He always came to our house with a civilian uniform. Other soldiers who had babies with girls were leaving the camps in their military uniforms, that’s why they can be found more easily. I, however, was not able to remember the number on his uniform. Some women who did are now working there.” (Mother, Beni).

Unclear Complaint Pathways Participants did not have a comprehensive understanding of UN protocols for assistance; few knew their official right to paternity and child support or how to access it. Unfamiliar with the procedures of filing complaints against perpetrators in their countries of origin, mothers assumed that the geographical distance to fathers spoiled their chance of assistance. Without clear guidance, the prospect of talking to uniformed personnel, particularly from the same organization as their abusers, was intimidating.

“I haven’t gone to MONUSCO. We don’t know where and how to accuse him, and we can’t know where those MONUSCO guys are today. It is hard to go see someone you don’t know and have never met.” (Mother, Bukavu).

Misinformation It was a widespread misconception that the main form of support that could be awarded through UN authorities was employment with the organization. Encouraged through UN personnel, one mother was waiting for her son to be old enough to claim his allegedly rightful place at MONUSCO.

“The MONUSCO troop major even said there is nothing to worry about, since my child is a boy, he can easily be employed with MONUSCO later, as soon as he reaches ten years of age. I was expecting him to get a job at the end of this month but so far nothing has happened and there is no one who can guide me on how to get child support.” (Mother, Bukavu).

Several factors were thought to influence who was getting assistance. Some participants were under the impression that only mothers who conceived children during the MONUC era were being supported. Others believed that whether assistance was granted depended on the ethnicity of peacekeeper fathers. This could be a sign that at earlier stages UN regulations were not universally adhered to or interpreted differently across base camps or contingents.

“Only the ones who had babies with them a very long time ago are supported.” (Mother, Beni).

“I know that there are women in similar situations who work at MONUSCO. I know they are mainly the ones who had babies with Tanzanians.” (Mother, Beni).

Based on these and other rumours in the community, it is likely that victims draw false conclusions regarding who qualifies for assistance, and do not report SEA and

childbirth if they consider their children's ethnicity, age or gender unlikely to render them eligible for support.

Change in Policies Mothers with older PKFC occasionally reported that they had received food rations in the past as unofficial forms of assistance from the UN. The more stringent laws and regulations that came with renewed mandates, combined with the regular rotations of contingents, prevented mothers from continuing to access these services. Once stricter regulations required them to re-establish their eligibility for support through legal action, they often refrained from filing complaints due to an incomplete understanding of the legal pathways and a perception that UN officials were already aware of their situation.

"I went to MONUSCO when the child was four years old. I asked them to help me be in touch with the father as I was burdened with the child's responsibilities and charges all by myself. They asked me to come back after one month to get some food. They gave me rice, beans, cooking oil; the next month they did likewise. In the third year, they chased me away and asked me to open a case somewhere [...] I understood that there was no support and decided to stay at home." (Mother, Goma).

Lack of Confidence in Authorities A further barrier to reporting SEA was participants' distrust in Congolese and other authorities. Because of previous experiences with military or police and local corruption, participants believed that speaking out was naive, if not dangerous, thus demonstrating a general lack of confidence in the UN's reporting mechanisms.

"I didn't report the relationship because Congolese authorities are useless. MONUSCO authorities don't know anything, there is no point in going there. They are not thinking about us, yet we have their children." (Mother, Kisangani).

Fear of Negative Consequences Related to that, some mothers were afraid that attracting attention to their situation could have negative consequences such as UN officials taking PKFC away or fathers being repatriated before paternity had been recognized.

"They came looking for me while I was away. They only met my mother; she hid the child from them. She was afraid that they would take her. MONUSCO knows that there are so many children that were left by these agents. They constantly make false promises." (Mother, Beni).

Others were worried how asking for assistance would affect their reputation. Participants seemed to fear showing weakness, as well as the potential jealousy and retaliation from their communities if they were to be granted assistance.

"Human beings are scornful of others when they request assistance; that is why we avoid talking about it, we prefer not to open our heart to other people. Whatever happens, is supposed to happen." (Mother, Goma).

Non-Reporting as Resilience Occasionally, silence was perceived to demonstrate resilience. The Congolese ethos of "la débrouille" describes a sense of resourcefulness that has previously been found to illustrate coping with unlawful conduct

(Trefon 2004). Derived from the French term “se débrouiller” [to find a way], it is often applied to mean that “using one’s own means” to overcome adverse conditions is the locally anticipated response to hardship (Braun 2016, 21).

“I don’t know his address and I won’t search for it. I think I am intelligent enough to help myself. If I get vegetables, I cook and eat. People say that he, who trusts in others, dies helplessly. I believe in myself and pursue progress and a better life.” (Mother, Kalemi).

Evidently, under-reporting of paternity is a complex, yet prevalent issue (Grady 2016). The failure of the UN to ensure effective reporting and investigative processes violates victims’ rights a second time and increases the suffering of PKFC families (Freedman 2018). The power gap between mothers and peacekeepers, which is recognized by the UN, silences those most in need of support and is reinforced by the UN’s lack of transparency.

Barriers to Compensation and Support

Many of the social, political and psychological obstacles that prevented mothers from reporting were closely linked to practical difficulties in realizing assistance, manifested in complications with legal recognition or services from the Trust Fund. Mothers who advocated for their right to compensation often faced barriers with respect to (i) inadequate processing and communication of their claims, (ii) corruption, (iii) the gap in legal authority between the UN and TCCs, and the (iv) limited availability and communication of specialized services.

Inadequate Processing and Communication of Claims Of those who contacted UN authorities, a large majority said they received limited help from the organization. Participants detailed that some UN officials violated their right to information about legal processes by urging mothers to seek comfort in their spirituality, rather than court actions. Other officials were empathetic towards women’s needs for support but left them “without answers to their questions” about the navigation of a complex, multi-layered legal system. The lack of action reinforced the widely shared notion that UN officials had no interest in holding peacekeepers accountable for fathering children.

“I tried to speak to MONUSCO officials and requested that they look for the father in his country, but my effort was unsuccessful. I went to the place where women who are left with children go to expose their problem to a woman working for the UN. When I went there, I saw no reaction. In fact, they didn’t do anything. It is hard to understand (cries).” (Mother, Bunia).

Mothers who gave accounts of an initial investigation, often described poor follow-up and mismanagement of their cases. Repeat interviews, lengthy delays or non-compliance with promised next steps made for a distressing process. Due to the lack of tangible progress, some mothers eventually gave up hope that they could benefit from legal processes.

“We were told to register our children with MONUSCO but so far there hasn’t been any feedback. They disappointed us, only moved our case around. MONUSCO says they advocate transparency and discipline because they are supposed to, but in practice they don’t have it.” (Mother, Bunia).

Participants recounted meetings where MONUSCO officials had gathered them in public places, in order to take photos and video footage of children with mixed ethnicity or collect blood and saliva samples. They deplored that, years afterwards, these actions had not led to sustained assistance and that DNA results had not been released.

“MONUSCO is supposed to help. They come here from everywhere and take photos. They ensure us that their chief is requesting to have a record of all the children who were left by MONUSCO agents. I even went to their headquarter for further support, they took several photos but then nothing. I cried out for help showing them the difficulties we are encountering when raising our children.” (Mother, Bunia).

Corruption The interviews strongly suggest that in some instances illegal processes and corruption led to victims not being treated according to UN guidance. The following example shows that incidents of SEA and childbirth were at least occasionally swept under the carpet.

“The officials at MONUSCO did not answer, they did not do anything as if they were silently backing up the actions of this man. Luckily, the superior of my husband¹³ was relocated, and they brought in a new chief to the mission. When my parents presented the case to him, he pressed my husband to pay charges. We found out that the former gentleman was corrupt.” (Mother, Bukavu).

In a similar way, doctors were accused of being partial towards peacekeepers and of having falsified paternity tests to their advantage.

“We had a blood test done after the child’s birth in Goma, the result being positive. The woman [procurer] asked the Malawian to plot with the doctor and say that the blood of the child and the man were different. She asked him to refuse the pregnancy for his job protection [...] My parents consulted the human rights office, or parliament of children’s rights but didn’t succeed. There was no reaction from either party and no one came to investigate. We gave up since nobody helped us.” (Mother, Goma).

Gap in Legal Authority When adequate reporting and processing of cases took place, the repatriation of implicated peacekeepers was perceived to delay the prompt handling of cases and interfere with participants’ chances of being supported. It appeared logically inconsistent that allegations were substantial enough to repatriate peacekeepers but could then not be verified or translated into assistance.

“One day I went to report the case to the Bangladeshi Police. I explained to them how their soldier had abused me and got me pregnant without providing any care...

¹³ Some mothers perceived the fathers of their children as partners rather than perpetrators. While not legally married, they symbolically speaking referred to them as “husbands”.

when I came back to present my arguments, they revealed that he was sent back to South Africa because I had reported him. I learned that he was reshuffled to South Africa without listening to what I had to say. I then decided that it was better to drop the matter since it was already entangled with discrimination and scorn.” (Mother, Bukavu).

Echoing the experiences of other victims of SGBV, the emotional impact participants experienced from passing through this complex system of law enforcement resembles anger, resentment, sadness, fear and shame (Williams 1999; Tamarit, Villacampa and Filella 2010). Victims’ lack of confidence in receiving compensation through legal action contributed to their desire for rehabilitative and transformative social services.

Limited Availability and Communication of Specialized Services for Victims Recognizing these difficulties, the UN made grants available to fund a range of support services from an alternative source (Conduct in UN Field Missions 2020c; Office of the VRA 2020). Financed by the Trust Fund, local organizations in DRC have implemented some of the first UN projects to provide livelihood support for SEA victims by engaging them in education and vocational training (Conduct in UN Field Missions 2018; UN General Assembly 2018). Two participants discussed labour organizations and women’s rights initiatives who organized services that resemble Trust Fund initiatives, although they did not identify them as such.

“Nobody took care of the child apart from me and an association for women. They reported what had happened to MONUSCO and came back with ‘muzadi’, some money for assistance for me to stop prostitution. The organization supported me in building a house, completing a bakery and a sewing workshop, getting a mushroom farm [...] that’s why I stopped bothering MONUSCO for help.” (Mother, Goma).

Contrary to the participants’ perception that other victims of SEA had occasionally received such assistance, most study participants had not been offered rehabilitative or transformative opportunities themselves. Non-transparent information regarding the existence of services at the time of data collection left mothers to wonder why other victims were treated preferentially, causing jealousy and envy between them. Hence, the limited availability and communication of specialized services could lead to further psychological harm and damage victim support networks.

Policy Considerations

This is the first study to involve child participants in research that investigates paternity related to UNPK and thus, foregrounds the protagonists’ voices and increases their visibility in discussions about victim support. By analysing the experiences of mothers who conceived children with peacekeepers and the children born of these relations, we contribute crucial information to the very limited knowledge base relating to this population.

Although comprehensive resolutions increasingly lay out the regulations for victim support, for affected individuals, access to justice often remains elusive. Recent UN initiatives and measures to address the perceived failures outlined above will take time to be fully implemented in host and member states. Hence, we expect the effectiveness of changes in system-wide policies and programming to be better reflected in the missions' future practice. Nonetheless, our research shows the inadequacy of policies in 2018 and the urgency for programs to be adjusted. In addition to the actions introduced by the SG in 2017 and their application by the VRA, we have identified several factors that impact the effectiveness of policies regarding victim support, in line with the four workstreams at the core of the new strategy: (1) putting victims first, (2) ending impunity, (3) consulting a multi-stakeholder network to victim support UN guidelines, (4) improving strategic communications and transparency (UN General Assembly 2017).

Putting Victims First

The data presented in this article contributes to elevating the voice of victims and raising awareness about their situations. The results summarized participants' most pressing needs and their demands for assistance, thus highlighting valuable information for the realization of a victims' rights approach. Our data shows the restrictions and potentially long-term impacts of the lack of economic resources for PKFC who are born into families that often cannot ensure a minimum subsistence. Participants in each group indicated that poverty and economic deprivation were the key factors underlying their struggles. The scope of individual needs ranged from survival resources to tools for self-actualization. To enable a basic living standard, participants lacked adequate food, health care, hygiene supplies, clothing and safe shelter. In the hope to secure stable livelihoods and rise out of poverty, participants asked for assistance with housing, education and employment. Thus, they desired forward-looking assistance with lasting impact rather than immediate material support to relieve their most pressing needs.

Structural support could have immense impact in contexts like eastern DRC where severely restricted access to resources prevents the sustainable reintegration of victims into host communities. Our results endorse the UN's efforts of supporting mothers through career building and income generating activities (e.g. job placement, professional and vocational training). PKFC—at a minimum—need to be supported through scholarships that cover their education fees, school materials and uniforms. We expect livelihood opportunities to counteract the often reported downward spiral and poverty trap, which mothers experience when child rearing exacerbates hardships and forces them to engage in sex-work as a means of survival. Rehabilitative and transformative services could furthermore help additional societal goals by dismantling gendered stereotypes and structures that have fostered SEA in the past (Manjoo 2013).

The UN faces multiple barriers to providing compensation and accountability within the existing framework and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future. Recognizing this reality might mean employing justice mechanisms with higher consideration of victims (Blau 2016; Lambourne 2009). Restorative, rather than

retributive, forms of justice emphasize victim-centred interventions, which are in line with the UN's most recent approach (De Greiff 2008; Freedman 2018). The push towards victims' reparations echoes developments in international human rights law that shift the focus from the prosecution of the implicated peacekeeper towards emphasis on repairing the harm caused to the victim (Burke 2014; Strang 2010). The testimonies shared above homogeneously support a holistic approach to accountability, that focuses on assistance and mitigates the harmful consequences of SEA more directly.

Since the Trust Fund in Support of Victims is currently the main funding source to translate the comprehensive strategy into practical assistance, disbursements from the Trust Fund are crucial to provide mothers and PKFC with support that is not predicated on legal accountability. However, in order to grant specialized services to all victims of SEA, and those born as a result of it, financing of the Trust Fund needs to become a priority and exceed voluntary contributions of member states and payments withheld from peacekeepers against whom allegations have been substantiated (UN General Assembly 2017). Based on that, we advocate to further strengthen the focus on the Trust Fund and expand its current reach and infrastructure. The 2017 annual report of the SG recommended that member states should withhold payment to TCCs who do not promptly carry out investigations and transfer these resources to the Trust Fund (UN General Assembly 2017; Van Leeuwen 2019). While the General Assembly is yet to leverage this mechanism, we recommend that TCCs who cannot uphold the UN's standards of conduct be required to financially supplement the victim assistance programs to maintain their engagement in UN peacekeeping. More precisely, we propose to withhold a percentage of national reimbursements until the end of the posting for a unit, which is then paid out once all allegations are addressed.

PKFC are not victims of SEA in the traditional sense, but they are children born of war, who suffer from fatherlessness and the related economic and social consequences. As such they require support mechanisms that tackle their unique situation by providing them with the resources necessary to thrive as individuals (Baines and Oliveira 2020). In line with the recommendation of the Zeid report (2005), we request that assistance from the Trust Fund is extended to children born of peacekeepers whose identity is unknown or whose parents engaged in consensual sexual relations.

Ending Impunity

Ending impunity is directly linked to the effectiveness of mechanisms that mitigate harm and manage the consequences of SEA for affected victims (Hooper 2006). Evidently, convictions of perpetrators are sporadic under the UN's current legal infrastructure (Freedman 2018). Our data established that SEA and rearing of PKFC often remain unreported and that multiple barriers stand in the way of victims obtaining legal redress. The lack of policy enforcement through TCCs creates a vacuum of jurisdiction and punitive measures that shields perpetrators from assuming responsibility for their actions and, ultimately, enables the continued perpetration of SEA by peacekeeping personnel against host community members (Akonor 2018).

It is the mandate of the VRA to ensure that victims can pursue paternity claims through “appropriate and timely judicial processes” (UN General Assembly 2017). Yet, our findings suggest that many mothers do not receive the necessary legal support to file paternity claims or track the progress of their cases. Although the UN commits to completing initial investigations of allegations within a six-month time period, extenuating circumstances and lengthy delays in conveying information to court systems often extend legal actions (Mudgway 2016). The resulting timelines are inconsiderate of the urgency of victims needs and reinforce the harm inflicted. Additional control mechanisms are necessary to ensure that victims are assisted in the pursuit of claims. This could be achieved through impartial investigators who oversee progress and decision-making in paternity cases and provide data on the outcomes of claims (King et al. 2020).

Our results clearly show the need to amend investigation protocols. Paternity and child support claims are reliant on evidence, yet “bribing witnesses not to testify, to testify falsely or to obtain evidence is widely practiced” in DRC (Mandrup and Cold-Ravnkilde 2017, 4). According to a South African legal officer, before the National Investigation Team arrives to assess an allegation, “evidence often gets lost, and the names of witnesses can be difficult to identify” (Mandrup and Cold-Ravnkilde 2017, 4). The data presented contains serious allegations of falsified results and corruption interfering with paternity tests. This is extremely damaging to the social and emotional status of victims. In his 2005 report, Zeid Raad Al’Hussein recommended that each UN personnel who is the subject of an allegation should either unconditionally accept the claim or prove the allegation insubstantial by providing a DNA sample (UN General Assembly 2005). Conversely to this victim-friendly approach, at present, the UN offers assistance in obtaining DNA but the cooperation from TCCs is voluntary, and although increasing, the response rate to requested genetic material is low. Academic researchers have highlighted the benefits of mandatory DNA testing for peacekeeping personnel prior to deployment to confirm or refute paternity claims immediately when they arise; however, after 15 years of debating a DNA databank as the “gold standard”, this method has still not been implemented (Blau 2016).

The immediate repatriation of implicated fathers amplified mothers’ difficulties in seeking child support, since it removed the alleged offender from local jurisdiction and effective prosecution in host countries (Smith 2017; Lee and Bartels 2019). Collective repatriation of national contingents has previously been reported to obstruct the possibility to thoroughly investigate witnesses (Whalan 2017). Thus, repatriation needs to be revisited and calibrated towards the needs of victims. While it is vital that abusers leave the mission, delaying their repatriation until all necessary evidence has been collected would simplify some of the logistical difficulties of cross-border investigations (Whalan 2017). In the meantime, disciplinary measures should be imposed to prevent further misconduct.

Improving Communication and Transparency

Communication with victims is key in rebuilding trust and designing effective remedies (De Greiff 2008). In line with existing research, our data indicates that

information gaps are the main reason for victims' discontent with investigations (Tamarit, Villacampa, and Filella 2010). The high rates of drawn-out cases and non-reporting in this study demonstrate that the operationalization of claims was not easily accessible to victims. Moreover, it indicates that victims were at least occasionally denied their "right to information" or "right to access of justice", as specified under procedural laws (McGonigle Leyh 2011, 127). Internal protocols define the credibility of evidence and speed at which cases move forward, however, this guidance is often not available to victims, making it impossible for them to determine the fairness with which claims are assessed. Currently victims of sexual abuse or exploitative sex-work are less likely to report paternity, since they often cannot identify the peacekeeper perpetrators or do not have the information that they believe necessary to verify their allegation. In the interest of non-discrimination, it is of critical importance that victims are made aware of their rights irrespective of their circumstances. Transparent information regarding what is required of victims to qualify for assistance could remove some of the discussed barriers and improve solidarity between victims. To date, very little information regarding how paternity is established and child support enforced, has been made public. To be accountable for peacekeepers fathering and abandoning children, UN statistics need to become more coherent and transparent. Greater information sharing regarding how many children are receiving support and what that support looks like is necessary so that victims feel actively encouraged to pursue claims and understand the procedures (and barriers) in place.

Based on the data presented, the UN needs to be cognizant of the perceived reality that reasonably founded allegations have not always led to an investigation in the past. Future research should determine how to rebuild victims' trust after past failures and encourage mothers to take legal action despite prior mishandling of their cases.

Consulting Multi-Stakeholder Networks

Facilitating access to social services for victims requires the existence of these services, as well as budgetary and human resources for their maintenance (Whalan 2017). The UN emphasized its obligation to build "networks of support" through civil society organizations and local authorities that promote targeted response efforts (UN General Assembly 2017). Few of the women in this study were benefiting from local support services and providers. Those who did, acknowledged their positive impact and relevance to their situation. Thus, our study credits the UN's existing cooperation with local organizations in providing support projects which, with nationwide coverage, could significantly better the lives of victims and promote systematic monitoring of SEA through communities. In the interest of regaining and retaining victims' trust, the UN should, however, clearly communicate which partners work as facilitators of support.

Initiatives to promote community outreach and complaint reception mechanism are especially important in contexts like eastern DRC where SGBV is generally widespread and there is exhaustive demand for trauma-sensitive assistance (Maedl 2011). Thus, fighting conflict-related sexual violence requires an integrated and

coherent approach that is carried out in collaboration with local support services and implementing partners (Whalan 2017). This reinforces the transformative goals of structural support (Manjoo 2013).

The work of the VRA includes the mapping of support available to victims in countries with PKOs (UN General Assembly 2018; Connors 2020). We urge this mapping to consider countries with retired peacekeeping forces or areas where troops have been withdrawn to learn about the burden that local entities shoulder once UNPK leaves host state communities. Identifying gaps in services available to victims in countries that have previously hosted PKOs is anticipated to result in lessons learned for more effective post-deployment strategies. It is vital that resident coordinators for victim support remain engaged after MONUSCO has been terminated and that plans for the continuation of outreach activities are introduced while the mission is still active. In addition, researchers should talk to victims in different settings to establish best practices regarding victim assistance and understand the needs of victims in other contexts of UN peacekeeping, as well as barriers to rights and reparations.

Conclusion

The article has engaged with recent debates regarding the consequences of sexual misconduct committed by UNPK personnel and contributed knowledge regarding the situation of mothers who conceived children with peacekeepers and the children born of these relations. This is the first study to explore the perspectives of PKFC through data collected with child participants and thus, contributes important information to what constitutes assistance “in the best interest of the child” (UN General Assembly 2008, 4). Our findings suggest that PKFC are a neglected and disadvantaged group who receive limited assistance from peacekeeper fathers despite the fact that they are often lacking the bare minimum for survival. The narratives shared highlight the impact of PKFC’s restricted access to economic resources on their health, safety, and self-actualization and bear witness to the ineffectiveness of UN victim support processes. While notable progress towards prioritizing a victim-centred approach has occurred in recent years, the operationalization of reforms on the ground remains woefully inadequate. Persistent effort and institutional changes are needed for transformative action to occur across the UN system and to shift the complex organizational dynamics that have enabled SEA in the past towards better protecting and serving local populations.

Based on our findings, we make the following recommendations to improve current practice: Placing victims at the forefront of matters related to SEA means strengthening the focus on restorative justice that repairs the harm caused to the victims via structural support. The Trust Fund is at the core of long-term support, therefore, increasing disbursement to the Trust fund is vital. We recommend that TCC financially supplement victim assistance programmes via the Trust Fund and that future participation in peacekeeping be conditional on improved accountability and support mechanisms. Moreover, assistance from the Trust Fund must be extended to all PKFC, irrespective of the nature of their parents’ sexual relations.

In order for a zero-tolerance policy to be successful, the UN needs to meet its stated goals of prevention, justice and accountability. While the UN can only take limited action against personnel themselves, they can however exert political pressure on TCCs to comply with the steps necessary to hold their defence leadership accountable. The low success rate of paternity and child support claims undermines the UN's attempts to end impunity and take swift and decisive action. Protocols for investigations need to be amended so that unlawful conduct, lengthy delays and the repatriation of implicated peacekeepers do not interfere with collecting evidence and DNA testing. This could be achieved through a DNA data bank or impartial investigators who oversee investigations and release data on paternity claims. Greater transparency and information sharing about the operationalization of assistance might remove some barriers to reporting and help regain victims' trust. To promote sustainable response efforts, local support services and implementing partners should work with the UN on an integrated approach to SGBV that benefits victims of SEA once MONUSCO is no longer active.

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Data Availability The datasets used during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

We attest to the originality of the submission and confirm that the manuscript has been submitted solely to this journal and has not been published elsewhere.

Declarations

Ethics Approval This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the University of Birmingham (ERN_18-0083; ERN_17-1715; ERN_17-1715A), Queen's University (6019042) and the Congolese National Committee of Health Ethics (CNES 001/DP-SK/119PM/2018). Local research clearance was requested in each district's regional administrative centre.

Consent to Participate Verbal informed consent was obtained and recorded prior to the interview from all participants and children's legal guardians.

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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