

## Sexual exploitation and abuse: implication of humanitarian workers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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**The humanitarian sector is no exception to the evils that plague all of human society. Sexual violence not only affects the victims of such acts but also seriously undermines humanitarian work as a whole and the people who do it for no one else but the vulnerable populations who need it.**

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Sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) in conflict-affected countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is highly troubling and pervasive.<sup>1</sup> Josephson and Sematumba<sup>2</sup> have pointed out that SEA in the humanitarian sector has been an issue in multiple contexts since the 1990s. In the DRC, it came to public attention in 2004 following an investigation of the United Nations (UN) Office of Internal Oversight Services into allegations of SEA perpetrated against members of the local community seeking protection near UN peacekeeping camps. The investigation found that the problem was severe and ongoing.<sup>3</sup>

To respond to the multiple problems faced by crises-affected communities, people adopt various coping strategies, including succumbing to SEA committed by some humanitarian actors.<sup>4</sup> United Nations missions and agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGO) and movements are devoting increasing efforts to address the problem. The UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly have adopted several resolutions to protect local populations against SEA;<sup>5</sup> the UN General Secretary has issued special measures to tackle the issue,<sup>6</sup> and NGOs have established codes of conduct and principles specific to the subject. However, despite the considerable

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<sup>1</sup> Krista Larson and Paisley Dodds, “UN peacekeepers in Congo hold record for rape, sex abuse”, *AP News*, 23 September 2017, <https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-pakistan-africa-sexual-abuse-international-news-69e56ab46cab400f9f4b3753bd79c930>

<sup>2</sup> Alina-Anna Josephson and Rachel Sematumba, *From Saviour to Perpetrator – and Back to Saviour? How to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse by United Nations personnel*, The Insecure Livelihood Series, March 2024, <https://www.gicnetwork.be/from-saviour-to-perpetrator-and-back-to-saviour/>

<sup>3</sup> United Nations, *Peacekeepers’ sexual abuse of local girls continuing in DR of Congo, UN finds*, 7 January 2005, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2005/01/125352>

<sup>4</sup> Shehu Salmanu, “Nigeria: Ending sexual abuse in IDP Camps”, *Deutsche Welle*, 28 March 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/nigeria-ending-sexual-abuse-in-idp-camps/a-68690841>; Faith Osasumwen Olanrewaju, Femi Omotoso and Joshua Olaniyi Alabi, “Datasets on the challenges of forced displacement and coping strategies among displaced women in selected Internally Displaced Persons’ (IDPs) camps in Nigeria”, *Data in Brief*, vol. 20, October 2018, pp. 152–158, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352340918308151>

<sup>5</sup> United Nations, *Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse – Resolutions*, 2022, <https://www.un.org/preventing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/content/resolutions>

<sup>6</sup> UN Secretariat, *Secretary-General’s Bulletin: Special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse*, 9 October 2003, <https://www.unhcr.org/media/secretary-generals-bulletin-special-measures-protection-sexual-exploitation-and-sexual-abuse>

attention and the extent to which SEA is increasingly widespread in humanitarian activities,<sup>7</sup> its impact on survivors and humanitarian missions remains devastating.

This article will present different patterns of SEA in DRC and their consequences on survivors and humanitarian missions. After this introduction, we will define SEA and the research methodology. We will then present different patterns of SEA in DRC and describe their consequences.

### Defining sexual exploitation and abuse

So far, the common definition of SEA comes from the special measures issued by the UN General Secretary for the protection against SEA. According to this measure, SEA is defined as:

“An actual or attempted abuse of someone’s position of vulnerability (such as a person depending on you for survival, food rations, school, books, transport, or other services), differential power or trust, to obtain sexual favors, including but not only, by offering money or other social, economic, or political advantages. It includes trafficking and prostitution.”<sup>8</sup>

It is a broad term that includes several acts described in the definition, including “transactional sex,” “solicitation of transactional sex” and “exploitative relationships”.<sup>9</sup> It refers to the involvement of a person in sexual activity that they do not fully comprehend and are unable to give consent for.<sup>10</sup> Sexual abuse can be traumatic and lead to shock, fear, sadness, anxiety, or depression.<sup>11</sup>

### Methodology

This article is based on twenty interviews with SEA survivors, six community members engaged in accountability mechanisms at the local level and six members of NGO and UN agencies involved in SEA prevention. Interviews were conducted from December 2022 to February 2024 in Beni, Goma, Bukavu, and Uvira. The information collection process used a qualitative, grounded theory approach.<sup>12</sup> Based on recommendations we received from local organisations assisting SEA survivors, we contacted and interviewed survivors using the snowball sampling technique.<sup>13</sup> All participants were informed of the purpose of our study and their right to withdraw from the study and to stop sharing at any point should the

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<sup>7</sup> Rodolphe Mukundi and Robert Flummerfelt, “EXCLUSIVE: More women accuse aid workers in Ebola sex abuse scandal”, *The New Humanitarian*, 8 March 2023, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/investigations/2023/03/08/more-women-accuse-WHO-aid-workers-ebola-sex-abuse-scandal>

<sup>8</sup> UN Secretariat, *Special measures...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> United Nations, *Glossary on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse*, Second edition, 24 July 2017, [https://hr.un.org/sites/hr.un.org/files/SEA%20Glossary%20%20%5BSecond%20Edition%20-%202017%5D%20-%20English\\_0.pdf](https://hr.un.org/sites/hr.un.org/files/SEA%20Glossary%20%20%5BSecond%20Edition%20-%202017%5D%20-%20English_0.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Olivera Simic, “Rethinking ‘sexual exploitation’ in UN peacekeeping operations”, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, vol. 32, no. 4, July-August 2009, pp. 288–295, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0277539509000545>

<sup>11</sup> Psychology Today, *Sexual Abuse*, 2024, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/sexual-abuse>

<sup>12</sup> Anselm L. Strauss and Juliet M. Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, Sage Publications, 1998, [https://research-proposal.ir/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Basics\\_of\\_Qualitative\\_Research\\_Techniques\\_and\\_Procedures\\_for\\_Developing\\_Grounded\\_Theory.pdf](https://research-proposal.ir/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Basics_of_Qualitative_Research_Techniques_and_Procedures_for_Developing_Grounded_Theory.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Adi Bhat, “Snowball Sampling: Definition, Method, Pros & Cons”, *QuestionPro* (blog), 2018, <https://www.questionpro.com/blog/snowball-sampling>

participant feel uncomfortable continuing. They were also asked to sign the consent forms or give oral consent. Privacy, anonymity and confidentiality were respected by using pseudonyms.<sup>14</sup>

We conducted this research as part of our thesis on humanitarian governance in DRC. We had initially decided it was not feasible to focus on SEA, considering that we are male. However, during the research, we noticed many participants brought up the issue and were often eager to tell their stories. We therefore decided to make SEA one of the focal points of our research.

### Research findings

#### Patterns of SEA

In DRC, SEA survivors' stories reveal several patterns of SEA, including: sexual exploitation of aid recipients, sexual exploitation of job applicants, sexual exploitation for funding, sexual exploitation of humanitarian colleagues in more junior positions and forced or coercive sex with domestic workers in offices, NGO guest houses or rooms of humanitarian actors.

#### *SEA for jobs*

To gain access to jobs in humanitarian organisations, some girls and women are forced to have sex with recruiters. Nabindi, a 20-year-old girl from the Bulengo camps in Goma, said:

“I wanted the job. He asked me to meet him in Mugunga. Then he asked me to have sex with him so that he could give me a job. This was an opportunity to save my family. We had sex several times. I got pregnant, when I told him, he disappeared, I never see him again.” (March 2024, Bulengo in Goma, DRC)

Some humanitarians use job opportunities to coerce the behaviour of disadvantaged people. They take advantage of the vulnerability of job candidates or internally displaced people to offer them jobs for sex. Feeling unable to refuse or seeing this as a lifeline, some people accept, even though the job does not often materialise.

#### *SEA for funding*

Within the DRC, some local organisations can only access funds by having sex with humanitarian actors or paying money as kickbacks. One young women's organisation leader said:

“During Ebola, I worked with young girls and women to raise community awareness. One of the response leaders asked me twice to have sex with him in exchange for funding, but I refused. We submitted good projects to them, but they never selected one.” (December 2022, Beni, DRC)

This quote tells us that some humanitarian workers use the power they get from their organisations to abuse vulnerable people or the partners they work with. As affected people are sometimes in weaker positions, they are not capable of challenging this behaviour.

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<sup>14</sup> The data analysis process was done via coding in ATLAS.ti 23.

### *SEA for job security and promotions*

Staff in positions with less seniority, including interns, cleaners, drivers, assistants and so on are often subject to SEA. While access to these positions is usually less difficult than becoming a manager, climbing the ladder to get to a higher position is a challenge in the humanitarian sector. Bukungu, a 23-year-old woman and former staff member at a UN agency in Uvira said:

“One day my boss called me to his room at 6 pm in Lusenda and told me to have sex with him for the security of my job. I was confused but needed to secure my job. After the act, I decided to report him, but I was concerned about my reputation.” (September 2023, Uvira, DRC)

Bukungu was exploited by her boss, but she did not report it. The reluctance to report has negative consequences, creating a climate of impunity for abusers. To protect her position, Bukungu may have had no choice but to say yes; however, no one can know what would have happened if she had reported the incident or responded differently.

In addition to SEA for funding, jobs and promotion, participants also reported SEA of aid recipients for aid or ration cards and forced or coercive sex with domestic workers in offices and guest houses. Although not reported in many cases, all these practices have consequences.

### **Consequences of sexual exploitation and abuse**

For survivors, many consequences were reported by victims. Some survivors of SEA gave birth to children and the majority of these received no assistance from the sire. Most survivors’ families consider these children an extra burden. Both children and their mothers are then stigmatised, mocked, humiliated and belittled in their communities. One survivor of SEA in Beni said:

“Every time I passed throughout our neighbourhood, some young people would shout at me, others whispered or exchanged glances and facial expressions. So, I feel uncomfortable. I was forced to move to Kasindi, where I now live.” (January 2023, Beni, DRC)

Survivors also experience rejection by husbands and relatives, leading to social isolation. Some men refuse to continue living in a married relationship with abused women. Single mothers are often rejected from their families, especially orphans who live with their relatives. They also run the risk of not getting married because they are seen as sex workers, HIV positive or carrying sexually transmitted diseases. In some local cultures, the virginity of young girls reflects the honour of her family. Its loss is perceived as a disgrace and dishonour for the survivor and the family, especially when it happens unintentionally. A young boy from a youth movement in Beni said:

“When I discovered that my girlfriend was sexually exploited by Ebola staff in exchange for a job position, I decided to leave her. It was for me a way of avoiding stigmatisation of my family.” (January 2023, Beni, DRC)

When their abuse becomes public knowledge, survivors tend to isolate themselves to avoid humiliation, stigmatisation and rejection. Others decide or are forced to move to other locations. This

## HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

was the case for Mikebenge in Baraka, whose aunt decided to send her to Burundi. More often, they are traumatised, and they feel shame, guilt, fear and/or depression.

Participants also mentioned many consequences of SEA on humanitarian staff members, programme reviews and organisations' reputation. When a staff member violates the SEA policy, he is subject to disciplinary procedures, leading to loss of employment, loss of reputation and shame. One of the participants said:

“Two staff of a UN agency were fired during the Ebola response in Beni after being reported committing SEA.”

SEA also affects the quality of the programme. When people are employed because they have sex with recruitment managers, they often do not have the necessary skills to achieve the expected results. One government official we met in Beni stated:

“During the Ebola outbreak, most prostitutes in Beni were recruited to work in the response. The recruitment process was not subject to any official procedure, and no qualification was required. I struggled to supervise the work of some staffs. Sometimes, when I asked them to work, they responded - do your job; you do not know how I got here. It was stressful for me, but that was the reality.”

From this quote, we understand that some tasks were not implemented as needed to achieve the expected outcomes because of SEA. These practices put stress on staff whose instructions were not followed and negatively impacted the response programme.

When organisation managers are involved, some staff members not engaging in these practices are made to feel demotivated. One doctor who worked in the Ebola response shared a poignant observation:

“At 2 pm, some experts who earned hundreds of dollars a day were rushing off to join their girlfriends at the hotels. We were left alone and worked hard but were paid less than 10% of their salary. So, it was a sort of institutionalised injustice.” (January 2023, Beni, DRC)

This quote vividly illustrates the demotivation of staff who witnessed their managers' misconduct. Their motivations affected their productivity as there was no consequence for the people misbehaving, who were still earning significantly more. SEA also compromised the vital work of humanitarian actors, endangering survivors and the reputation of the humanitarian sector. A representative of the youth movement in Beni told us:

“The SEA practices, the opulence, and the lack of community involvement in the Ebola response led us to conclude that Ebola was a business. People from Kinshasa who knew the dangers of Ebola abused our girls. What is more, even when some of these girls became sick, we never recorded a case of a senior Ebola response staff. This disease was created by humanitarian actors to make money.”

Some people considered humanitarian actors to be businesspeople, coming over to make money and enjoy themselves with women in Beni. Misconduct, including SEA, impacted the humanitarian efforts.

Therefore, the objective of saving lives was neglected despite many positive efforts made by NGOs, UN agencies and other actors to save lives in Beni.

### Conclusion

When perpetrated, SEA compromises the vital work of humanitarian actors and endangers survivors' lives and the reputation of the humanitarian sector. Research has revealed that SEA are perpetrated by both international staff (expatriates) and local staff of NGOs and UN agencies, with most reported cases involving international staff. Humanitarian workers that perpetrate violence are subject to disciplinary procedures, leading to shame and loss of employment. For survivors bearing children that are usually not recognised by the sire or families, they are stigmatised, mocked, humiliated, isolated, and sometimes rejected by both family members and the wider community. There are also negative consequences on aid operations, as teams may not be formed based on the skills and motivation for the work they possess; staff not involved in these practices risk feeling seriously demotivated. Efforts need to be made to ensure that humanitarian actors address systemic issues that contribute to SEA and strengthen survivors' resilience to have their dignity and self-esteem restored.

For a broader approach to the question raised here, see our *Focus* (co-directed by Jan Verlin) : "Gender-based and sexual violence: the current state of the humanitarian sector", *Humanitarian Alternatives*, Issue 16, March 2021, <https://www.alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/our-publications> [Editor's note].

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### Biography

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