

The Problem of Peacekeeping Sex Abuse Is Not Going Away

[PassBlue](#)

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Jane Holl Lute, center, is the UN's point person on dealing with sexual exploitation and abuse by UN personnel and those in that orbit. Her visit to Bambari in the Central African Republic in April 2016 was an exploratory trip.

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There is no denying that sexual exploitation and abuse has acquired greater urgency within the context of United Nations peace operations. Although the UN launched its zero tolerance policy in 2003, a recent report tallied some two thousand accusations between 2005 and 2017 in peacekeeping settings, which underscores how harmful ineffective policies and specific guidelines have become.

In cases reported in the Central African Republic, children have been abused in exchange for humanitarian assistance –biscuits and bags of rice. Nonetheless, most of the allegations of sex abuse against UN peacekeepers have not been submitted to thorough investigation. In addition to the trauma experienced by victims, the persistence of sex abuse allegations creates an insecure environment for the local population that the peacekeeping mission should be

protecting and affects the legitimacy and effectiveness of peace operations. Why, then, have sexual exploitation and abuse allegations, or SEA, become such a sensitive topic at UN headquarters and its partner organizations?

As has happened with other grave issues that demand action by international organizations as well as member states, SEA has become a battleground for broader power struggles. What should be a clean-cut issue of improving both preventive and punitive approaches has instead become marred by rivalries and mistrust among categories of actors and the UN architectures they favor. Debates over sexual exploitation and abuse are now shaped more by power games — for instance, over who gets to set norms at the UN and who gets to set budgets — than about addressing the trauma, stigmatization and social effects that the affliction generates in conflict-affected countries.

On the surface, the issue has gained working definitions, a legal framework and a variety of mechanisms. The 2003 policy has been followed up by reports, resolutions and dedicated measures that have been carried out, such as the [Zeid report](#) in 2005 and the establishment of the Conduct and Discipline Units in 2006. However, the UN's propensity to avoid embarrassments tends to mute attempts at self-reflection and prevents better responses. Three points of tension have become particularly sharp in the last two years.

First, some major troop and police contributing countries from the developing world, especially from Africa, feel they are singled out and stereotyped, even though major allegations have also been leveled at peacekeepers from donor states. This perception is deepened by the type of collective punishment that Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon resorted to in such cases, like pulling out an entire contingent of 630 troops from the Democratic Republic of the Congo because of allegations from 2015. The following year, Ban established the [Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#).

The fund relies on voluntary contributions (unfortunately, only Bhutan, Cyprus, India, Japan and Norway have made donations so far) and on payments redirected from troop- and police-contributing countries whose staff are convicted. While taking care of the survivors should be first and foremost on the agenda, if this type of collective punishment is doled out selectively, it will undermine not only the morale of the contingent involved but also the country of origin.

For example, despite promises of help, the children who reported being sexually abused by French troops in the Central African Republic are still [living in the streets](#). Even if the allegations against French troops emerged during Operation Sangaris (2013-2016), this was a UN Security Council-mandated mission, so there should also be enforcement of the UN's due diligence

policy for such operations, as well as corresponding pressure on the respective country of origin of accused troops.

Second, sexual exploitation and abuse has become yet another locus of the permanent dispute between the General Assembly and the Security Council over decision-making. Although the Council is the institution responsible for authorizing UN peace operations, negotiations over the behavior of peacekeepers take place in the General Assembly: at the C34 (part of the Fourth Committee) and the Fifth Committee, tasked with administrative and budgetary decisions. Now and then, the Council decides to take over the issue and takes pre-emptive decisions to stop the Assembly from deliberating over SEA. The [main example](#) was the only resolution issued by the Council on the issue, No. 2272 (2016), which endorsed proposals put forth by Secretary-General Ban at the time to combat the problem, particularly the controversial recommendation that entire military or police units be repatriated when recurring offenses are substantiated.

Finally, sexual exploitation and abuse has at times been instrumentalized as a tool that reinforces the deep divide between the role of donor countries, who have dominated the decision-making process in peace operations and peacekeeping in particular, and the developing country troop and police contributors. This trend has become particularly evident in the last year as donor countries, especially the United States, use SEA as one of the “exchange currencies” to cut the budget of peacekeeping operations and to further reduce the already-small influence of troop- and police-contributing countries in relevant issues.

Collective punishment, such as repatriation, is neither effective nor legitimate. Innovations in combating sexual exploitation and abuse requires investing more in prevention rather than dismissing promising efforts, such as the gender mainstreaming work taking place in some peacekeeping training centers in the Global South, including Brazil’s Peace Operations Joint Training Center (Centro Conjunto de Operações de Paz do Brasil, or CCOPAB).

On impunity, the [Code Blue campaign](#), launched in 2015, has been advocating for such measures as removal of immunity, independent investigation and special courts. On prevention, the UN’s Department of Field Support in the peacekeeping office launched an e-learning mandatory training in 2016 for troop- and police-contributing countries to prevent SEA. Prevention also requires improving command and control to make peacekeeping more effective in general; that includes avoiding sexual exploitation and abuse in the first place.

Despite these steps, fostering and spreading best practices will go nowhere if more space for perspectives is not given to the countries that contribute troops and police and to keeping the discussion in the most democratic forum of the UN security architecture: the General Assembly.

Likewise, thinking of ways to apply the norms that the UN has developed to non-UN peacekeeping operations supported by the Security Council and requiring better training by lead countries in such missions is essential to helping combat the problem.

Last but not least, efforts to combat sexual abuse must be depoliticized and attention must be paid to those who ultimately suffer both from the abuses committed and from the lack of productive action by the UN: the victims. It is unacceptable that crimes against vulnerable populations that require humanitarian assistance continue and that the issue has been hijacked by broader geopolitical interests. Innovation is sorely needed in this aspect of conflict prevention, but it will not come from the current path.

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