

# Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) within the Humanitarian Sector

Experiences from eastern Democratic Republic of Congo

## Keywords

Humanitarian action; accountability; DRC; sexual exploitation;  
sexual abuse; sexual misconduct

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## Summary

Despite multiple codes of conduct and guidelines introduced by the UN IASC since 2002, beginning with 'the six principles relating to sexual exploitation and abuse<sup>1</sup>', Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) is still an ongoing and acute problem in multiple humanitarian settings across the world. Featuring original field-based research in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) by Humanitarian Studies Centre researcher Delu Lusumbaya Mwenebayeke, this brief presents research into cases of SEA within the Humanitarian Sector in North and South Kivu. The brief also looks into available reporting mechanisms and accountability practices. The circumstances surrounding SEA are varied and intersect with economic deprivation, poor accountability, and social exclusion. Large numbers of victims do not feel empowered to speak out, and the research indicates poor accountability in general.

This research looks into the experiences of a group of (woman) victims in eastern DRC, and whilst it can provide important transferable lessons from its context, it should be noted that each humanitarian context will of course have its own complicating factors. Similarly, different humanitarian organisations will have different reporting and/or accountability procedures – which may be more or less effective in their context.

## Research purpose

This research intended to look into the circumstances around SEA within the Humanitarian Sector in Eastern DRC. More specifically, it looks into the experiences of (mainly) lower-level workers for humanitarian agencies, including (i)NGOs and those working to support UN interventions.

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# What is SEA?

**“** 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.” (UNSG, 2003)<sup>2</sup>

## Research Methodology

This research brief is based on field-based research undertaken by Humanitarian Studies Centre researcher Delu Lusumbaya Mwenebayeke. The research is based on 32 interviews in total. 20 of these were with survivors (victims\*) of SEA within the humanitarian aid sector, six with community members engaged in accountability mechanisms at the local level, and six with members of NGO and UN agencies involved in SEA in South Kivu and North Kivu. Interviews were carried out from December 2022 to February 2024 in the cities of Beni, Goma, Bukavu, and Uvira. Survivors of SEA were selected and contacted based on the referrals that the research team received from Community Based Network Complaints members and two local organisations assisting SEA survivors. All participants had worked within the humanitarian aid sector in eastern DRC. Further identifying characteristics have been anonymised to preserve the privacy of participants.<sup>3</sup>

## Categorising the Circumstances around SEA within the Humanitarian Sector

SEA survivors’ testimony reveals several patterns of exploitation, with intersecting elements including abuse of official position, transactional relationships, and abuse of access to supplies. Of the interviews held and the experiences shared, some themes (including of transactionality) become clear:

### Sexual Exploitation and Abuse for Jobs

Some interviewees noted that to get a job in a humanitarian organization, women are forced to have sex with recruiters. Whilst this practice is forbidden by various codes of conduct and internal regulations, it is still common, and in most instances where SEA cases are reported, the perpetrator goes unpunished – especially when the case is reported directly to the organization.

**“During the Ebola outbreak in Beni, I was recruited as a cleaner at health zone. A few days later, a doctor became interested in me. He often came to say hello to me. One day, he invited me to his hotel and promised me a promotion as a community mobilizer if I agreed to have sex with him. I accepted, but the next day, his behavior changed. He did not want to see me anymore and started dating another girl with whom we worked together. I wrote to the health zone chief that I wanted to meet him and tell him what happened to me and dropped the paper in the suggestion box, but they never called me. The following month, I was not on the staff list; that is how my work ended.” (Excerpt from an interview in Beni, DRC, 2022)**

\* This research brief acknowledges the contested nature of the term ‘victim’ and cautions the reader against categorising or ascribing an identity that results in assumptions and negative portrayals of someone who has experienced SEA

## Sexual Exploitation and Abuse for Funding

Whilst the exact arrangements vary depending on the case, several interviewees noted that exchanging sexual acts for (I)NGO or UN-Agency funding is common. Similarly, one interviewee noted that her various projects were rejected for funding due to her refusal to have sex with the male staff that were making funding decisions.

**“Four years ago, we applied for funding to [UN Organisation – name redacted]. One evening, a section chief invited me to his office; he offered me a project, but under the condition that I agreed to have sex with him... by then I did not know any mechanism to report a UN staff member, so I reported this to another UN staff member I knew from human rights affairs. He promised to follow up on the case but never returned to me. A few days later, I was informed that the person was transferred to Goma.”**  
(Excerpt from an interview in DRC, 2023)

## Sexual Exploitation and Abuse for Job Security and Promotions

Some survivors that were interviewed for this research noted that sexual exploitation of lower-ranked and temporary workers in the humanitarian sector is common. This includes people working as interns, cleaners, drivers, community mobilisers, assistants, and in some cases, programme officers.

**“A few days after my recruitment in Uvira, I was seconded to Lusenda. On my fourth day of work, my boss called me to his room at 6 pm, and told me he wanted to have sex with me for the security of my contract. I tried to refuse, but he was very mean to me. I was confused because I needed the job. After the act, he gave me fifty dollars. I decided to report him, but I was concerned about my reputation and doubted the protection of the information using the existing mechanisms”. (Excerpt from an interview in Uvira, DRC, September 2023)**

## Other Types of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

Fewer respondents also noted that they had heard of or seen examples of sexual exploitation and abuse in order to access humanitarian aid supplies. Others also reported widespread abuse of domestic staff, workers in expatriate offices and/or guesthouses.

# Is there a Culture of SEA? What Motivates both Perpetrators and Victims?

There is a large body of work to suggest that SEA is widespread within humanitarian contexts, and there is also a large body of work to suggest that humanitarian workers and affiliates have been responsible for perpetrating SEA in multiple contexts. Less scholarship has been completed looking specifically at abuse faced by lower-ranking (and often locally-recruited) humanitarian workers, however a 2021 systematic review noted that within the UN system: “Overall, 39% of respondents experienced sexual harassment whilst working at the UN, with 51% of those reporting that their harasser was a colleague<sup>4</sup>” There is also ample evidence for a lack of accountability for the perpetrators of SEA in humanitarian contexts<sup>5</sup>, aside from examples gathered withing this specific piece of research.

Some contributing factors to the widespread nature of SEA and poor accountability for perpetrators have become clear from the research:

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| Lack of employment opportunities, especially for women without a formal education.                              | Severe economic power imbalance between humanitarian staff and affected populations. |
| A culture of impunity – unanswered complaints, non-confidentiality, lack of control of staff in isolated areas. |  |

## Consequences of SEA for Victims

Whilst there are various documented cases of UN and/or (I)NGO staff members losing their employment due to SEA, the consequences for victims are varied and severe.

**Children born as a result of SEA** are often not recognized by their parents, and considered a burden upon the family.

**Victims of SEA are often abandoned by their spouses**, or are not considered suitable for marriage as they are seen as 'sex workers'.

**Victims of SEA are often rejected by their community:** "Every time I passed through our neighbourhood, some young people would shout at me ['MONUSCO', etc]... I was forced to move to Kasindi" (Excerpt from an interview in January 2023, in Beni).

**Victims of SEA are often isolated**, whether in their community, or through being sent to live in another country – as was the case for one interviewee.

## Reporting Mechanisms – Effectiveness and Improvement

As part of this research, examples of the various reporting mechanisms available for victims of SEA in Eastern DRC were collected. The following list also includes evidence from the interviews conducted of some potential issues with the reporting mechanisms.

**Community-Based Complaints Mechanism:** "A system for blending both formal and informal community structures...", which is recommended by the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee. UN Staff interviewed for this research noted its existence and use in big towns. **However, none of the victims interviewed were aware of its existence.**

**Potential improvement: increase public information efforts in rural areas, tailored for local audiences**

**Community-Based Complaints Networks:** A network of community leaders and CSO representatives working to support UN-owned reporting systems, for example those monitoring MONUSCO. **Victims interviewed were reluctant to use them, due to the potential for recrimination, identification, or information leak – though some still did with trepidation.**

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**Potential improvement: implement stronger vetting and anonymity procedures for network members and those using them**

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**Reporting Hotlines:** Several NGOs have phone numbers for reporting cases of SEA, which go through to country/regional offices in Kinshasa. One survivor that was interviewed in the course of this research said: **“When I called, the person who responded was speaking French, I couldn’t continue because I couldn’t understand anything”.**

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**Potential improvement: ensure that Reporting Hotlines are available in local and regional languages**

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**Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA)/Accountability Focal Points:** Several organisations, including UN organisations, have set up small staffed offices to receive and process SEA complaints. No survivors interviewed reported using one of these points, however it was noted that **local-level complaint management committees tended not to include local representation/non-Humanitarian-staff, leading to a lack of trust in their work.**

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**Potential improvement: work with local communities to improve representation and trust in Focal Points**

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**Suggestion Boxes:** A minority of SEA survivors that were interviewed were aware that these boxes could be used to report sexual misconduct. PSEA Focal Point Staff that were interviewed reported that **“Sometimes we spend 2 or 3 months without opening the suggestion box. To open a suggestion box, we have to wait for everyone involved to be there”.**

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**Potential improvement: implement the checking and processing of suggestion box submissions as a regular duty of staff, with a digital repository for anonymised complaints**

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## Conclusion

The research summarized in this brief looked into widespread Sexual Abuse and Exploitation by UN and (i)NGO staff members in Eastern DRC. Survivors interviewed were found to have been exploited during times in their lives where they were severely disempowered by lack of employment, or access to economic opportunity – providing an opportunity for abusers to exploit their official position and roles as ‘gatekeepers’ to employment or funding.

The research also indicates the importance of local networks, which play a key role in both supporting victims, making sure that reporting mechanisms work, and also for bolstering many of the negative social effects experienced by victims. A greater and closer understanding of the nuances of these local networks, and the interpersonal relationships within them, is needed to ensure the efficacy of reporting mechanisms, and for building accountability within eastern DRC.

Whilst multiple reporting and accountability mechanisms exist and are available for victims of SEA in Eastern DRC, they have various drawbacks. A common issue seems to be a lack of effective communication of their existence to victims, matched by a lack of trust in the confidentiality and effectiveness of the mechanisms.

In some cases, more simple issues effectively blocked reporting; for example reporting hotlines not being available in local languages, or complaints boxes remaining unopened for months, or accountability networks not including any affected community representatives in their makeup. It is important to note that this research provides a snapshot of experiences within eastern DRC, and whilst it provides important learnings around the lived experience of victims of SEA, as well as the use of reporting mechanisms, different contexts will provide different issues and complications in ensuring that instances of SEA can be drastically reduced for those employed in humanitarian organisations.

## References

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## Further reading

- UN IASC online knowledge bank for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse: <https://psea.interagencystandingcommittee.org/>
- Safeguarding support hub and information bank: <https://safeguardingsupporthub.org/>
- ODI Humanitarian Policy Network report on tackling SEA: <https://odihpn.org/publication/tackling-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-by-aid-workers-what-has-changed-20-years-on/>
- #AidToo, or when situation permits rape: sexual violence among humanitarian aid workers. Sauter, M. (2024). #AidToo, or when situation permits rape: sexual violence among humanitarian aid workers. Journal of International Humanitarian Action, 9 (1): [doi.org/10.1186/s41018-023-00146-1](https://doi.org/10.1186/s41018-023-00146-1)
- STOP the Sexual Assault Against Humanitarian and Development Aid Workers report: <https://fic.tufts.edu/publication-item/stop-sexual-assault-against-aid-workers/>





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The Hague Humanitarian Studies Centre (HSC) is a hive of transformative initiatives around Humanitarian Studies aimed at academic and applied research; teaching and training; networking and impact. The HSC was established in August 2023 by Professor Thea Hilhorst, following her NWO Spinoza Prize award in 2022.



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