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ABSTRACT

This article reviews how peacekeeping officials safeguard children from sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) in Liberia, more than 15 years after the landmark reports published on this issue. Based on original fieldwork conducted in Liberia and in New York, the article introduces an innovative framework to assess whether or not organisations effectively safeguard children from SEA. It reviews three interrelated issues: reinforcing the institutional environment in the country, strengthening prevention of and accountability for child SEA by UN actors. The article concludes with specific policy recommendations for actors involved in peacekeeping activities.

Introduction

In the early 2000s, two pivotal reports were published about widespread sexual exploitation and abuse of children in three West African countries (Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone) by UN peacekeepers and by personnel working for the UN's humanitarian implementing partners (UN 2002; UNHCR and Save the Children UK 2002). The reports shone light on adults demanding sex from children in exchange for providing them with goods and favours like food, money, hygiene products and other "luxuries" like mobile phones, perfume, rides in NGO vehicles, and being granted access to entertainment venues. Along with the follow-up report by Save the Children in 2008 (Csásky 2008), these reports highlighted the vulnerability caused by severe economic deprivation, lack of any opportunities for education or work, pressure from peers or parents, children living on their own or heading households comprised of younger siblings, or children living in extended families. Although not dissimilar to many other peacekeeping and humanitarian contexts, there was an expectation that the UN had learnt lessons from grave violations in the preceding decade, and there was significant disappointment and outrage that the protection mandates – including on human rights and on responsibility to protect – that had been created in the aftermath of grave abuses and failures had been inadequate. The recent storm surrounding the allegations of staff of Oxfam in Haiti using prostitutes – potentially minors – demonstrate that the policies in place are not robust enough. As Kevin Watkins, Chief Executive of Save the Children, said during the oral evidence at the House of Commons:

> both of those reports that you mentioned [Save the Children Reports of 2002 and 2008 on SEA] highlighted the role, essentially, of powerful men as gatekeepers to food, shelter and security, and the fears and concerns of the people they were there to serve who felt threatened by them, unsafe and unprotected. What has come to light over the past couple of weeks cautions all of us against complacency, (UK House of Commons 2018, Q99).

The UN Secretary General notes in "Investigation into sexual exploitation of refugees by aid workers in West Africa" that, although the genesis of this "crisis" was in Liberia, the United Nations is

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addressing the issue on a global basis (UN 2002, para. 5). The first reports of widespread sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) in peacekeeping and humanitarian contexts had come to light in the 1990s, with particular attention paid to the UN and its implementing partners' roles in child prostitution in Cambodia (MacKay 2001) and sex trafficking rings in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s (Human Rights Watch 2002). Many widespread harms and abuses had come to light, but perhaps the most egregious were the reports of SEA of children in the most fragile societies to which the UN had been deployed to protect. Not only did the Save the Children report highlight just how little had changed, it was also the first systematic report to uncover the breadth and depth of the problem and to analyse the systemic failures by all entities tasked with protecting children in those contexts. Crucially, those reports became the catalyst for the UN to take its first concrete steps to holistically address sexual exploitation and abuse perpetrated by its staff engaged with peacekeeping operations.[1]

The UN's first significant response to the reports from West Africa was the issuing of the Secretary-General's Bulletin setting out a zero tolerance approach to sexual exploitation and abuse (UN 2003; for further discussion, see Dahrendorf 2006; Mendelson 2005). An internal policy for UN employees, the Bulletin set out that there should be no sexual contact between UN staff members and local persons whom they served, irrespective of whether the sexual contact was lawful (UN 2003, 3d). That Bulletin, while frequently criticised today for being too vague and for setting out employment rather than criminal standards, was a significant step insofar as it set out a policy that went beyond international and national laws, and that sought to hold UN employees to the highest possible standards. The "Zero Tolerance" policy is the basis for the Secretary-General's annual report, with data on allegations and information on measures being taken to strengthen prevention, enforcement and remedial action.[2] Some other measures, such as Zeid's proposed criminal law treaty, have been sidelined by the UN or its member states (UN 2005a, 2005b). Others, such as proposals for better pre-deployment training, have simply tinkered around the edges of a problem that requires practicable and significant solutions. As a result, 15 years later, and despite many attempts to effect local and system-wide reforms and changes, much remains to be done to protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse in peacekeeping and humanitarian contexts.

There is a vibrant, critical, literature on international peacekeeping and aid analysing the (gendered) power differential between international and local actors (see, among others, Higate 2007). This research agrees that these structural factors help explain the prevalence of predatory and opportunistic SEA practices by peacekeepers and other actors in position of authority. However, the starting aim of this research was to bring the attention back to the local level (meaning, at the same time, national level and field level for peacekeepers), trying to "trickle-up" some of the actionable feedback and solutions based on evidence offered by actors on the ground. This by no means imply that we think these "solutions" solve the power imbalance of gendered relations in peacekeeping. However, we hope this conversation can be understood as trying to find ways to mitigate the most blatant repercussions of this power imbalance on the most vulnerable segments of local societies hosting peacekeeping operations. It is also the result of joint work by scholars with very different backgrounds and perspectives on these issues, including one practitioner working in the field of child safeguarding, one international law and human rights expert, and one international peacekeeping expert.

This article will revisit the efforts deployed in Liberia regarding child safeguarding in the past 15 years. As part of our broader research and policy work on how to safeguard children in UN peacekeeping operations, we determined that a follow-up study on the situation in Liberia was crucial for understanding good practice, areas of weakness, and how to effect practical solutions across all UN peace operations. Our research in Liberia focused on how safeguarding children has been approached by UN entities, the Liberian government, and local communities. As such, this study goes beyond the question of accountability of peacekeepers who have committed child SEA crimes to encompass child safeguarding in Liberia more broadly. This is in line with the "systems approach" adopted in this article, moving away from fragmented programming on discrete individual

child protection risks towards a systems-strengthening approach. Our research inquires this systems approach in practice in Liberia. Through meetings with individuals in a range of entities, we gathered data on current laws, policies and practices aimed at safeguarding children from sexual exploitation and abuse. The research findings focus on the three main areas in terms of changes made and outstanding issues that need to be addressed in: (1) the national infrastructure and systems; (2) the United Nations' prevention work; and (3) the accountability of the UN system. Clearly, the national level has a significant impact upon preventing and remedying SEA, but the UN level is crucial for tackling SEA by peacekeepers.

In this article, we suggest a framework that combines adherence to the highest international standards while also being context-specific. We set out how the child safeguarding framework works across scale, from the local through to the international, and explain the ways in which that framework operates to protect children from abuse and to provide support and remedies where harms are perpetrated. We then analyse child safeguarding in Liberia, following-up on the initial reports from 2001, analysing the changes that have been made, and demonstrating how and why our proposal for child safeguarding would improve the situation on the ground. While showcasing good practice, we demonstrate the need for a holistic and streamlined approach, and we provide the methodology for moving forwards in such a way that child safeguarding becomes a standard and central feature for all entities involved with peacekeeping and delivery of humanitarian aid. This article is intent on bringing together prescriptive and analytical dimensions together, and we conclude with specific policy recommendations in light of our findings in Liberia.

Methodological considerations

This article focuses specifically on fieldwork conducted in Liberia in 2017, but also makes a few references to data gathered in other UN peacekeeping operations (Haiti in 2018), in meetings with troop-contributing countries (Uruguay in 2017), in peacekeeping training centres (especially the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre in Ghana), as well as in meetings at the UN and African Union Headquarters. The fieldwork conducted in Liberia obtained ethical clearance by the University of Reading's ethical review committee (June 2017). The field research in Liberia included observational research and interviews with 15 senior UN personnel in a range of UN entities, staff in 11 NGOs working on child protection, and five staff members of national mechanisms undertaking aspects of child safeguarding. On the basis of this fieldwork, combined with ongoing research in other countries as part of the two projects, the authors have developed a new framework, which will be introduced in this article.

SEA and child safeguarding in Liberia

The United Nations peace operations in Liberia were a direct response to the civil war that ravaged the country between 1989 and 2003. The UN presence began in 1993 with an observer mission (UNOMIL) that took place in cooperation with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) operation established in 1990. Following Charles Taylor's election as President in 1997, UNOMIL had achieved its principal objective, observing and verifying the election process, as well as assisting the Liberian National Transitional Government to make sure the peace agreements were implemented. United Nations Peace-building Support Office in Liberia (UNOL) was then established to provide post-conflict peacebuilding, primarily to assist the government in consolidating peace following the July 1997 multiparty elections. However, the government and opposition were not able to resolve their differences, and there were continued systematic abuses of human rights in the country, leading to the resumption of civil war. In 2003, the Security Council authorised the establishment of a multinational force in Liberia. The United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) is composed of political, military, police, criminal justice, civil affairs, human rights, gender, child protection, disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration, public

information and support components, as well as an electoral component. That mission has remained in place to date.

There is a vibrant literature on "peacekeeping economies", understood as an economic activity, such as sex workers or domestic workers, that would not occur, or would occur at a much lower scale, without the international presence (Jennings and Boas 2015). The specific "unintended consequences" of the peacekeeping presence in Liberia has also been discussed at length (Aning and Edu-Afful 2013; Edu-Afful and Aning 2015; Henry 2015), especially the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration programmes (Jennings 2007, 2009; Munive and Finne Jakobsen 2012), which were a major component of the Liberian peace process after nearly 15 years of intermittent armed conflict and an integral objective of UNMIL. The specific literature on Liberia and security sector reform has focused on the "feminisation" of local actors understood as gendered power of internationals to "protect" local women, who are portrayed primarily as victims (Ryan and Basini 2017). Similarly, youth in Liberia has been labelled "subvertors or agents of peace", with authors judging that most research underestimates youth's agency and potential contribution to peacebuilding (Podder 2015).[3]

It is also important to underline that the specific child safeguarding agenda in the context of peacebuilding (protecting children from peace custodians) has emerged after almost a decade of normative development on the broader issue of children and armed conflict. This normative evolution was followed by key international statements on the Responsibility to Protect for instance, giving attention to questions of child protection and the need "*to conceive of children not merely as objects in need of protection, but as people with agency, whose voices need to be heard and perspectives understood*" (Glanville 2018, 13). The international agenda was arguably launched by a report written by Graça Machel entitled "Impact of Armed Conflict on Children", submitted to the General Assembly in 1996 (UN 1996), which was subsequently followed by the first UN Security Council on that question (UN 1999), and by the crucial Security Council Resolution 1612 (UN 2005c), considered "*fundamental for the day-today workings of child-protection-mandated agencies*" (Shusterman and Godwin 2018, 21). More recently, the Child Protection Working Group has highlighted the fact that "*although the primary responsibility to protect children from harm rests with government, all child protection responses should seek to make children more secure, facilitate children's and families' own efforts to stay safe, and reduce children's exposure to risks*" (CPWG 2012, 29). In this context, the literature has noted a general move towards "systems approach" (Wessells 2016), meaning a move away from fragmented programming on discrete individual child protection risks – child trafficking, children working or living in the streets, child labour – towards a systems-strengthening approach (Shusterman and Godwin 2018, 34). Our research inquires this systems approach in practice in Liberia.

Introducing the framework: an innovative approach to child safeguarding

We understand child safeguarding as the responsibility that organisations have to make sure their staff, operations, and programmes do no harm to children. This implies that they do not expose children to the risk of harm and abuse, and that any concerns the organisation has about children's safety within the communities in which they work are reported to the appropriate authorities. An overall approach to child safeguarding is rooted in understanding the risks to children from the organisation, including its staff, programme and operations. Ensuring organisations meet these requirements involves a robust and comprehensive process that begins with development, or strengthening, of a child safeguarding policy, and then requires organisational development in the form of allocating staff time, ensuring staff are trained and coordinated, and that there is good communication on safeguarding children. There also needs to be sound processes for planning, implementation, monitoring and review, so the policy is rolled out effectively. This ensures that an organisation has done all it can to prevent harm to children, and if an incident should occur, the organisation has appropriate response procedures in place.

To achieve this, we put forward that all organisations – including academic institutions – need to consider seven specific questions in order to assess whether or not effective child safeguarding structures are in place: (1) Where, when and how do programmes, staff and operations impact upon children, and what risks may these present?; (2) What policies and procedures are needed to prevent harm and how are concerns responded to appropriately?; (3) How to recruit safely?; (4) What safeguarding induction and training is needed to ensure staff know what the organisation expects of them and what should be done if they have a concern?; (5) Does the organisation have a clear code of conduct so that all staff understand their professional boundaries when working with children and what is and is not acceptable behaviour?; (6) Who is the appropriate designated person/people to act as the focal point in an organisation to receive and manage any safeguarding concerns and subsequent inquiry/investigation?; (7) Is there a context-specific and appropriate reporting and responding process for incidents and concerns?

One can assess whether or not an organisation is effectively mitigating the risks to children based on the answers to these questions. In turn, the answers to these questions can be structured around four specific standards, outlining key elements that should be in place to keep children safe and provide a comprehensive benchmark for preventing harm to children that are complimentary to other international standards and principles.

Standard 1 – Policy: The organisation sets clear policy that describes how it is committed to promoting the well-being of children, preventing abuse and creating a positive environment for children wherein their rights are upheld and they are treated with dignity and respect.

Standard 2 – People: The organisation communicates clearly its commitments to keeping children safe and the responsibilities and expectations it places on staff and associates in particular, its partners – through relevant policies, procedures and guidance, and that staff and associates (and other relevant actors, including children) are supported in understanding and acting in line with those rules.

Standard 3 – Procedures: The organisation implements a systematic process of planning and implementation of child safeguarding measures.

Standard 4 – Accountability: The organisation has in place measures and mechanisms for monitoring and review of safeguarding measures and to ensure both upward and downward accountability in relation to child safeguarding.

The framework is implemented within an organisation through: (i) a full assessment of current policies and practices; (ii) a robust mapping of relevant local and international laws and practices on child safeguarding; (iii) developing context-specific policies and procedures based on the organisation and the legal mapping; (iv) training; (v) follow-up. These five steps combined provide robust and holistic methods for ensuring child safeguarding standards are raised, implemented and complied with across an organisation. The framework is written in a way that makes the standards relevant and achievable in all contexts, but of course there needs to be specific methods of assessing and implementing in different contexts, particularly fragile ones such as peacekeeping operations. However, they may be more difficult or challenging to implement in some countries and local contexts than in others. For example, reporting abuse to local or national authorities may not be straightforward if the reports are not handled properly. There are, however, always organisations working nationally and locally that can provide advice on reporting cases, and local mapping will identify these. Another example is the difficulties in applying standards of practice that are not supported by national law; for example, where the age of consent is less than 18 years and where young people under 18 are legally able to work can be problematic. However, international standards apply definitions in line with international law, and are designed to prevent harm to all children under 18.[4]

What we have developed using this framework and through research in peacekeeping operations and contexts is an overview of what an entity or actor involved with peacekeeping needs to do to meet the international standards on child safeguarding. Before explaining and applying those standards to

peacekeeping contexts, it is first important to understand the particular complexities and difficulties of child safeguarding in peacekeeping contexts, based on the data we have gathered in Liberia. Doing so provides the foundations for demonstrating how and why a child safeguarding framework is crucial for effecting robust system-wide change that safeguards children in these situations.

Child safeguarding and the UN mission in Liberia

In this section, we set out three main research findings of our fieldwork, focusing on the national level (reinforcing the institutional environment), but also the international level (strengthening prevention of and accountability for child SEA).

National level: reinforcing the institutional environment

While there remains severe economic deprivation in Liberia, the majority of people have been resettled outside of IDP camps, and the economy is growing and is more stable. The political stability and stronger governance in Liberia also contribute to an environment in which safeguarding measures and initiatives may be developed and implemented. As interviewees emphasised, stability contributes to the creation, maintenance and improvement of policies and laws: "*when there is instability in the country, it destroys everything. The focus during instability is on life-saving, and there are no resources or time for development or social issues.*"[5] Despite improvements at the national level, there remain many gaps and weaknesses, and there is also significant difficulty in implementing laws and in facilitating individuals' access to justice. Although there are now good national laws on safeguarding children from sexual exploitation and abuse (primarily the Children's Law of 2012), based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, interviewees insisted that the political commitment to implementing those laws does not exist because attention is devoted to other government priorities. For instance, one interviewee mentioned that:

> there is no clear line between prostitution and transactional sex [in the national level], and little understanding of what entails rape even though the laws are clear. Low levels of education makes things harder for people to know whether what has been done is a crime.[6]

Another interviewee underlined that "*there is a need to follow up with courts and prosecutors, but there are no resources to get people there, either within organisations or within families.*"[7] One UN senior official insisted that these weaknesses "*mean that everyone struggles to protect and help children.*"[8] This is in line with other research on that question, highlighting the discrepancy between the diffusion of global norms such as international standards of child protection and the regional or local engagement with the norm (Prantl and Nagano 2018).

The role of Liberia's government was repeatedly highlighted as being of critical importance to ensuring child safeguarding. Although things had improved considerably since "*the early 1990s/ 2000s during the first UN presence, when there were desperate times with no government support systems of any kind for responding to abuse,*"[9] our interviewees highlighted that rape remains widespread, with 75% of all rape cases reportedly being child-rape with the age of victims/survivors ranging from a few months old to 17 years.[10] It was emphasised that national protection systems frequently do not follow up cases or allegations, and that the justice system rarely punishes offenders, with perpetrators easily able to bribe police or community leaders. The lack of institutional strength to tackle this environment in which abuses occur with impunity demonstrates the significant problems with achieving adequate implementation of national legislation.

Alongside the problems with implementing the laws is an ongoing need to improve societal awareness and protection, particularly for vulnerable groups. Currently there is no distinction between prostitution and transactional sex in Liberia. The low levels of education make it difficult to raise awareness of what constitutes rape, and to break the cultural silence around SEA. Orphans, street children, children with disabilities, and girls are particularly vulnerable groups.

Table 1. Areas needing improvement to tackle child SEA at national level.

Enforcement of and education about the legal age of consent, which is 18 years. Currently most people focus on the customary age of consent, which is 15.

Government policy and national legislation on safeguarding children. One model is the Family Support Unit in Sierra Leone, which includes a database of child safeguarding issues, specialist police units, training staff to support children, and parental accountability mechanisms.

Creating laws on child marriage and mechanisms for combatting child marriage.

Strengthening justice mechanisms and improving access to them for victims and survivors of SEA.

Education and awareness-raising about what constitutes SEA and what can be done to prevent or remedy these crimes, as well as to change society's understanding of the traditional role of a child in the family.

Laws and policies that address vulnerable children's specific needs and issues, including mechanisms for alternative care arrangements.

Changes to social protection, including policies influencing care that children receive within families, schools, and other institutions.

Development of governmental policies and national legislation on preventing and remedying child SEA by international actors such as the UN and NGOs.

Only 4% of Liberian children are registered with the state at birth, which means that they have no citizenship rights, including to schooling, leaving them highly susceptible to sexual exploitation and abuse, and to child trafficking. What is more, lack of registrations makes it near impossible to prove a child's age if there is any dispute as to whether they are 17 or 18 for the purposes of prosecuting statutory rape. Children with disabilities or learning difficulties are abandoned frequently, also leaving them vulnerable to significant harms. In-country child trafficking remains a widespread problem, with rural children taken to urban areas to be sex slaves or to peddle low-value goods for no or very low compensation.

As highlighted by interviewees and going beyond the general points raised above, the areas needed in order to tackle sexual exploitation and abuse of children at the national level are listed in Table 1.

United Nations: strengthening prevention

The priority of prevention is underlined in many UN documents, and indeed, as noted by Jacob, "*under the leadership of António Guterres, prevention has become the central rationale shaping the reform agenda across the UN system*" (2018, 77). A few key findings have emerged from our fieldwork. Interviewees made frequent references to the disconnect between UN Headquarters (UNHQ) and the peacekeeping operation on the ground. As one interviewee put it: "*DPKO policies provide guidance, but UNMIL creates all of its own practices because headquarters does not understand the context or specifics.*"[11] It was highlighted that every peacekeeping operation is required by UNHQ to have a SEA task force, and there is UNHQ guidance on protection measures, but practices on the ground frequently do not reflect institutional promises. Interviewees explained that UNMIL has to take UNHQ general guidance and translate that into mission-specific context, because – in a lot of ways – UNHQ "*says everything and nothing at the same time.*"[12] The other main challenge that was repeated throughout discussions was the need for specific child safeguarding measures that are separate from or go beyond the general measures combatting SEA. One recommendation from a staff member in UNMIL was that the training materials provided by the UNHQ should have a specific child safeguarding component as opposed to being focused on general sexual exploitation and abuse issues, which, for the most part, concentrate on adult issues.[13]

Leadership has been crucial for preventing child SEA in Liberia. The head (Special Representative of the Secretary-General – or SRSG) and deputy head (DSRSG) of UNMIL, along with senior leaders within UN entities in Liberia such as Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Conduct and Discipline Team (CDT) have provided particularly strong leadership and emphasis on combatting SEA, even though they have not had direct instructions to do so from UNHQ. In the words of one interviewee: "*senior leadership in UNMIL has been the most important way of tackling SEA, because you can see that without that leadership other missions like DRC and CAR*

do not do this type of work."[14] Although this is a priority for the CDT at UNMIL and at UNHQ, there remains a need for UNHQ to emphasise this issue as a key priority for all heads and deputy heads of missions. As it currently stands, effective child safeguarding within UN peacekeeping is dependent on having the right people in the right places.

Changes to the organisational culture in UNMIL have focused on changing attitudes as well as implementing laws and policies. Changes to attitudes are central to UNMIL having moved away from a "boys-will-be-boys" approach towards one that recognises every person's role in safeguarding children. CDT works with UN staff to understand why rules exist, rather than simply laying down those rules to staff who do not understand their purposes. To that end, UNMIL has implemented training procedures for all of its staff. The training is context-specific, and upholds and implements international and national laws and standards. UNMIL has to ensure that training goes beyond national standards, for example not ignoring homosexuality even though it is illegal in Liberia. There are concerted efforts to make training inclusive, and to ensure that everyone has access to the same information, in particular those who are not literate. As a result, many of the training materials are pictorial, and there is a heavy reliance on UNMIL Radio, which is the most popular radio station in Liberia and reaches 80% of the population, exceeding – in popularity and geography – even the BBC's programming.

It is important to highlight the fact that children are not only victims, but can also be actors of change in their own right. The National Director of SOS Villages emphasised the need to "*include children in creating measures and making sure they are safe from harm.*"[15] UNMIL radio has segments that are run by children for children. "*On the radio the children talk about child safety, staying safe in communities and families. It raises public awareness. And it teaches children what to do if they are abused.*"[16] The station also hosts monthly sessions by the CDT that explain what sexual exploitation and abuse is, and how it can be reported. Important for certain rural communities especially are the awareness-raising programmes that are delivered in various local Liberian dialects. Finally, education is crucial for prevention of child SEA: "*In schools children learn what abuse is and how to be safe. Education is the most important way to prevent children being harmed.*"[17] Children in urban areas are more aware than their rural counterparts of what is acceptable and appropriate. "*We see with children in the cities that they know what they can do to be safe, and how to say 'no'. They have more awareness and they have more education.*"[18] Children's clubs in communities enable children to be part of their own protection. "*Children in clubs help younger children, they explain what things are wrong and what to do if someone exploits them.*"[19] Schools with specific curricula aimed at education on SEA are central to those efforts. One example is the ECOMOG School, made up of children fathered by ECOMOG soldiers, another example is a school for girls who have been abused or exploited. In those schools we saw posters stating "It Is Always OK To Say No To Sex".[20] In the classroom we observed lessons centred on empowering girls about sex and their bodies.[21]

Despite these measures and the improvements that they have brought, specific areas of improvement (Table 2) were highlighted by interviewees to reinforce UN prevention policies of child SEA.

Table 2. Areas needing improvement for the prevention of child SEA at UN level.

While there have been strong UNHQ efforts on SEA, very little, if any, are specific to children, and there need to be *specific initiatives on safeguarding children*.

Child safeguarding clauses are not included as a matter of routine in staff contracts.

Greater emphasis on the fact that children must not be used to procure sex.

Military personnel should be trained on children's rights, ideally prior to deployment. They should commit to ongoing training and to upholding laws and rules on child safeguarding through a code of conduct or contract. Senior management should have regular training on child safeguarding, and these issues should form part of the daily briefings and marshalling of the contingents and be a constant agenda item in meetings.

Introduce measures to vet personnel. There is currently no method for UNMIL to investigate the background of peacekeepers or contractors. The problem is compounded by poor record-keeping.

Clear definitions of "sex" and "sexual activity" that are sufficiently broad to cover all activities concerned.

United Nations: strengthening accountability

One main area highlighted by the initial reports on Liberia was the impunity with which child SEA occurred. Alongside prevention activities, enforcement measures have been key to UNMIL addressing this issue. Awareness-raising measures are only useful when accompanied by strong reporting and accountability processes. UNMIL personnel identified weaknesses in terms of UNHQ reporting processes, as compared with UNMIL ones in which they had greater confidence: "*Too many things are lost or delayed when reports are made to Headquarters. No person takes responsibility for following-up.*"[22],[23] A major issue identified is the cultural barriers to reporting in Liberia. Abuse is a known issue, but many people are reluctant to report incidents. It was noted that children's peers tend to know of abuse, but that children often do not report those incidents to adults within their families or communities, and that there is a significant need to improve intergenerational reporting in order for those allegations then to be brought to the UN. Power dynamics, money imbalances, and lack of assurances of safety are all factors in children being reticent to report abuse. There is also a cultural trend of "normalcy" among children because there are so many incidents among their peers, which leads to acceptance of exploitation and abuse as part of life. Moreover, even when allegations are reported, it is unclear that the UN or national mechanisms provide support to the victims/survivors.

According to our interviewees, accountability was the weakest area of all activities aimed at combatting child SEA.[24] On the one hand, when reports are made, there are stronger accountability mechanisms than existed 15 years ago. However, those mechanisms are not yet sufficiently strong or streamlined across the system. The UN staff are seen as thorough in their investigations, but the outside impression is that the reporting mechanisms are very slow. Frequent practice is to focus solely on the perpetrator, not on the Head of Contingent or other senior staff with responsibility for personnel who work for them. Where there is an allegation against soldiers, there is little that the UN can do other than to refer the allegation to the troop-contributing country, which means that accountability processes are complex and opaque, as well as slow.

Beyond the points raised above, the following areas of improvement (Table 3) were highlighted by interviewees as needed to tackle child SEA.

Concluding thoughts and recommendations

Our research on safeguarding children from exploitation and abuse in peacekeeping contexts underlines that despite all the attention given to Liberia after the SEA reports in the early 2000s, there are still widespread problems in how the UN and other organisations deal with these issues. This goes in line with existing research on UNMIK, demonstrating that UNMIL's achievements were less clear and

Table 3. Areas needing improvement to tackle accountability for child SEA at UN level.

Transform the UN institutional culture into one of accountability, streamlining that accountable culture effectively across all UN activities.

Measures to *address and tackle the culture of normalcy surrounding SEA*. This will be a crucial step for increasing reporting of incidents and crimes.

Greater work between all UN entities, so that there is effective link-up and streamlining between all monitoring and reporting activities.

Greater transparency and effectiveness to prevent the current situation in which many allegations and cases are covered up or quietly dropped by the peacekeepers' national authorities.

The UN must follow up with courts and justice mechanisms, with resources provided for victims and survivors to access justice.

Creative lessons should be learnt from other UN country operations, for example by developing technology to enable reporting abuse through mobile phones or other devices.

Sanctions and accountability must be increased, with swift and decisive action taken to offer relief to victims and survivors and to deter future potential perpetrators.

Military personnel should have *a double deterrent*, with the threat of being punished both by the UN and by their home country.

Accountability should extend to senior leaders, who must be held responsible when personnel under their command perpetrate child sexual exploitation or abuse.

less pronounced in relation to the more complex areas of non-traditional and peacebuilding mission goals (see Farrall 2012). As we mentioned in the introduction, the problem is certainly structural, especially when you look at the profound imbalance of power behind most peacebuilding and statebuilding interventions (Lemay-Hébert 2011). At the same time, our research highlights the fact that there are many macro and micro changes that can be implemented effectively to strengthen child safeguarding from future harm. However, without effective streamlining across the UN and partner organisations, those measures are reliant upon strong leadership from individuals within the peacekeeping mission. Moreover, the effectiveness of those measures frequently depends upon the robustness of the national and international infrastructures, especially regarding the implementation of these measures. In this context, we suggest a series of specifically implementable recommendations. While informed by our child safeguarding framework and the four principles guiding it (policy, people, procedures and accountability), most of these final recommendations span across the four standards.

First, there is a need to ensure that UNHQ policies and initiatives are taken up by the senior leadership of all peacekeeping operations. We recommend that UNHQ ensure that anti-sexual exploitation and abuse measures and initiatives are directly emphasised and instructed to senior leadership in UN peacekeeping operations, and that they form part of all job descriptions and appraisals of those personnel. Linked to this, there is a need to formalise and standardise all safeguarding processes, including the good practices identified in Liberia alongside those found in other UN peacekeeping operations. This will ensure that all local communities receive the same protection, and that all UN personnel receive the same information and are subject to the same processes. There is a need to ensure that UN peacekeeping operations are effectively equipped to vet personnel in relation to child safeguarding. We recommend that UNHQ provide specific measures and support for peacekeeping operations to ensure that international and local personnel have been appropriately vetted prior to employment.

Second, there is a need for greater emphasis on and explanation of the needs of children within UN anti-sexual exploitation and abuse initiatives. We recommend that a part of all anti-sexual exploitation and abuse initiatives and measures for UN peacekeeping operations focus on the specific needs of safeguarding children. There is also a need for specific UN child-safeguarding policy and procedures that addresses the specific needs and vulnerabilities of children in relation to sexual exploitation and abuse, physical or emotional abuse, and other types of harms. All outreach programmes must be made accessible to and appropriate for children. Efforts should be made to communicate to children what they can expect in terms of what is and what is not appropriate behaviour by mission personnel, how to report any abuse and what they can expect in terms of the response and investigation.

Third, and linked to the second set of recommendations, there is a need to create child safeguarding measures that may be adapted to local contexts, are measurable, and can be implemented and followed up by UNHQ. We recommend that international and national actors work together to ensure that child safeguarding measures are created and implemented effectively, with consequences for failures to do so. Outreach programmes need to be in place in all mission hosting states to publicise the existence of the UN's zero tolerance of SEA and encourage people to report cases of abuse. Independent community-based complaint reception mechanisms must be established alongside all peacekeeping missions to provide psychosocial support, counselling and legal advice to the victims of the abuse and ensure that they are aware of their rights to redress. These mechanisms must be capable of reaching even the most isolated communities where peacekeeping troops are deployed. More research should be carried out on the extent to which communities in which peacekeeping missions are deployed are aware of the UN's "Zero Tolerance" policy and have access to complaint mechanisms when it is violated.

Finally, there is a need for victims/survivors to be included at all stages in the process, including through having their voices heard or represented in a meaningful way, and through information about each stage of the process being reported to them in a timely fashion. The local and

international adult communities need to support and facilitate children as peacebuilders, and as underlined by Huynh, D'Costa and Lee-Koo, this requires not just advocacy on behalf of children, but action to empower children to become responsible custodians of peace (2015, 189; see also Schwartz 2010, 23).

Notes

1. It is worth noting that even when those steps started to be taken, similar abuses were being perpetrated at around the same time in Eritrea by UN peacekeepers, and as a consequence, Italian, Danish and Slovak peacekeepers were expelled from Eritrea in separate incidents for sexual abuse of children (Barth et al. 2004).
2. Annual reports are available at https://conduct.unmissions.org/reports-secretary-general-special-measures-protection-sexual-exploitation-and-sexual-abuse.
3. For a similar argument about children and peacebuilding more broadly, see Lee-Koo (2015, 2018).
4. A more comprehensive discussion of the standards can be accessed at www.keepingchildrensafe.org.uk/how-we-keep-children-safe/capacity-building/resource-library.
5. Interview with SOS Villages Case Worker, Monrovia, Liberia, 27 September 2017.
6. Interview with senior government official, Monrovia, Liberia, 28 September 2017.
7. Interview with SOS Villages Case Worker, Monrovia, Liberia, 27 September 2017.
8. Interview with senior UN Official, UNMIL Headquarters, Monrovia, Liberia, 26 September 2017.
9. Interview with Principal, ECOMOG School, Monrovia, Liberia, 28 September 2017.
10. For the US Department of State, Rape is illegal, but the government did not enforce the law effectively, and rape remained a serious and pervasive problem. According to the latest World Health Organization figures, 77 percent of women and girls stated they had been victims of sexual violence. (US Department of State 2015, 14). More data can be found in the US Department of State report.
11. Interview with senior UN Official, UNMIL Headquarters, Monrovia, Liberia, 26 September 2017.
12. Interview with senior UN Official, UNMIL Headquarters, Monrovia, Liberia, 29 September 2017.
13. Interview with senior UN Official, UNMIL Headquarters, Monrovia, Liberia, 28 September 2017.
14. Interview with Marcel Akpovo, Chief of HRP, UNMIL Headquarters, Monrovia, Liberia, 29 September 2017.
15. Interview with Augustine Allieu, National Director of SOS Villages, Monrovia, Liberia, 27 September 2017.
16. Interview with Corinna Vigier, Conduct & Discipline Officer, UNMIL Headquarters, Monrovia, Liberia, 29 September 2017.
17. Interview with Principal, ECOMOG School, Monrovia, Liberia, 28 September 2017.
18. Interview with teacher, More Than Me Girls' Academy, Monrovia, Liberia, 27 September 2017.
19. Interview with Augustine Allieu, National Director of SOS Villages, Monrovia, Liberia, 27 September 2017.
20. More Than Me Girls' Academy, Monrovia, Liberia, 27 September 2017.
21. More Than Me Girls' Academy, Monrovia, Liberia, 27 September 2017.
22. Interview with senior UN official, UNMIL Headquarters, Monrovia, Liberia, 29 September 2017.
23. It is important to note that these interviews took place shortly after the UN appointed a Victims' Rights Advocate.
24. The UN's Office of Internal Oversight Services identified the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) as having a high incidence of alleged SEA. In its first SEA report for the country, released in February 2015, the UN's Conduct and Discipline Unit of the Department of Field Support identified 85 cases of alleged SEA in 2008–14 (US Department of State 2015, 2).

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