Framing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by UN Peacekeepers

Exploring the UN’s narrative surrounding the sexual misconduct of its peacekeepers

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Abstract

Throughout the past few decades, accusations of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers have emerged against the United Nations, ultimately proving to be true. This thesis investigates the UN’s own narrative surrounding sexual misconduct of its peacekeeping personnel, identifying the dominant frames present within UN response to these events. Investigating these frames is a vital contribution to research within SEA, as understanding every angle of an issue can lead to a more competent approach to eventual solutions. Press releases, reports, transcribed interviews, and policy documents are analyzed using framing analysis to do so. Three frames are suggested as reference points, with opportunity for new frames to present themselves during analysis of the material. Ultimately, the study proposes that four multiple frames are present within the UN discourse, however three are of distinct influence, and two are clearly dominant. Finally, the study comes to the conclusion that the UN frames sexual violence perpetrated by peacekeeper as a primarily systemic issue, with individual peacekeepers responsibility playing a secondary role. Further research is encouraged within the field of study, specifically in regards to the ways other actors within the peacekeeping context frame SEA.

**Key words:** peacekeeping, sexual exploitation and abuse, United Nations, sexual misconduct
Abbreviations

UN: United Nations
SEA: Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
PKO: peacekeeping operation
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1. Introduction

Humanitarian aid grounds itself in the principle “do no harm” (UNHCR, 2023). As a sector of humanitarian aid, peacekeeping subscribes to this same ideology, expecting its soldiers to perform their duties of assisting transitions from conflict to peace driven by this principle (United Nations, 2019). The past few decades, however, have revealed an alarming neglect of said principle by peacekeepers; across multiple peacekeeping organizations (PKOs), the UN included, links between peacekeeper presence and heightened rates of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) have been documented. Such documentation first emerged in the early 1990s in a Cambodia-based UN mission, and was quickly followed by reports from Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Democratic Republic of Congo, among other countries. The following decades continued to produce similar reports of sexual misconduct within numerous missions (Simić, 2010), but it was not until the early 2000s that this phenomenon broke through as an international discussion and was first truly addressed by the UN (Martin, 2005). Efforts to combat such misconduct soon followed, including establishment of reforms, updated codes of conduct, and the introduction of a ‘zero-tolerance’ policy in regards to SEA perpetrated by peacekeepers. Despite these developments, however, there is still widespread recognition today that “peacekeeping personnel are not held accountable for their conduct, and that there is a de facto tolerance of, and immunity from prosecution for, such behavior” (Murphy, 2006: p. 532).

The reality of SEA is profoundly disturbing under any and all circumstances, yet peacekeeper-perpetuated SEA encompasses another dimension of atrocity; it is the principal duty of peacekeepers to facilitate a path towards peace in conflict zones, and thus local populations have no choice but to place a significant amount of trust in peacekeeping personnel. Yet a recurring breach in this trust through blatant perpetuation of violence by the very people tasked with facilitating peace has been demonstrated time and time again (Murphy, 2006). This contradiction between peacekeeping doctrine and clearly harmful practices is unacceptable. So why is it that the principle of “do no harm” continues to be broken in this way? What is it about this phenomenon that it can simultaneously be condemned by the very institutions it inhabits and yet remain unchanged? This thesis aims to shed light on this dichotomy through an investigation into the UN’s own narrative surrounding the sexual misconduct of its peacekeepers.
1.1 Aim and Research Question

The intention of this thesis is to examine the UN’s conceptualization of sexual misconduct—otherwise referred to as SEA—by its peacekeeping troops. I will execute this aim through a framing analysis of material put forth by the UN to address peacekeeper SEA, searching for ways in which the UN as an institution frames said misconduct. Such an investigation is an essential contribution to research relating to SEA by peacekeepers, as it will highlight the dominant frames utilized by the UN when addressing this internal phenomenon and, in turn, shed light upon where the UN understands responsibility to be located, ultimately exemplifying how the UN perceives its own role within the contexts of these atrocities. Overall, the results of this thesis are essential contributions to the field of research, as they will provide a new angle of perspective within the discourse of SEA, and will therefore allow for greater insight into how to better respond to the issue in question. The explicit questions this thesis aims to answer is as follows:

*How does the UN frame sexual misconduct of its peacekeepers? Where is responsibility located within these frames?*

1.2 Outline

In the first section of this thesis, I have introduced the practice of UN peacekeeping and the shadow of sexual misconduct which hangs over its head. In section two, I go on to present further background on SEA and UN peacekeeping, followed by a literature review discussing the relationship between the two. I will then use section three to discuss the theoretical framework in which this thesis will be based, followed by section four which presents the thesis’ chosen method. The fifth section will present and discuss the study’s results. Finally, I will conclude this thesis in section six with closing remarks, including suggestions for further research within the field of study.

2. Previous Research and Background

A majority of previous research concerning peacekeeping operations (PKOs) has focused on the level of legal and practical success of missions, rather than attempting to understand the unintended negative consequences of peacekeeping, such as peacekeeper-perpetrated SEA
(Nordås and Rustad, 2013). What’s more, the literature that does focus on these consequences is often centered around policy reports and case studies, aiming to bring to light the extent of certain issues without addressing underlying causes. There does, however, exist certain literature which attempt to take on the challenge of understanding these root causes (Bakhti, 2019: p. 9-10). In the following section, I will introduce previous research which has aimed to discern such causes, specifically within the context of SEA by UN peacekeepers. This section intends to exemplify the general relevance of SEA in peacekeeping contexts, as well the gap in research which this thesis intends to fill and how it will do so. To do so, I will begin with a brief account of SEA as a concept and previous research within the field. This will help to highlight SEA as a gendered issue, paving the way for a summary of UN peacekeeping and the role gender mainstreaming plays within the peacekeeping framework. Following this, I will provide a literature review of SEA within the context of peacekeeping, providing further understanding of the phenomenon of peacekeeper perpetrated SEA and, through this, laying the groundwork for the content of this thesis.

2.1 Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

SEA and sexual violence are closely related, yet not synonymous. While SEA is a form of sexual violence, “SEA occurs when a position of power is used for sexual purposes against a beneficiary or vulnerable member of the community” (World Health Organization, 2023). More explicitly, SEA refers to sexual violence specifically within settings of uneven power dynamics, e.g. used to describe sexual misconduct by PKOs where perpetrators are those mandated to protect, therefore abusing their positions of power, and victims are members of the vulnerable population (World Health Organization, 2023). For the purpose of this thesis, SEA and sexual misconduct will therefore be used interchangeably.

A critical aspect of both sexual violence, and SEA as a branch of sexual violence, is that they are innately gendered problems. It is important to note, however, that while victims include all genders, this thesis focuses on the discrepancies between men and women specifically. To give perspective on why gender must be a part of the sexual violence and SEA discourses, it is important to understand that the majority of victims of sexual violence are women and girls, and an even greater majority of perpetrators are men (Cal Poly Humboldt., 2023). This is not to
minimize damages done to male victims, but to provide a framework for understanding the
gendered aspects of sexual violence, and consequently of SEA its subcategory. Thus, the
relevance of centering gendered lenses in such conversations can be understood is vital.

It is not just physical violence furthered through SEA that defines the issue, however. Another
aspect of both sexual violence and SEA demonstrated by previous research is an escalated
climate of fear and violence within victimized communities. These effects are intensified in
communities of economic instability (Aroustamian, 2019; Loya, 2014), and given that
peacekeepers are exclusively deployed in locations with such conditions, highlights the
devastating effects of peacekeeper perpetuated SEA all the more, especially with the
understanding that PKOs are meant to further peace, not violence and fear.

2.2 UN Peacekeeping and Gender Mainstreaming
The goal of UN peacekeeping is to assist “countries torn by conflict [to] create conditions for
lasting peace” (UN Peacekeeping, 2023a) through a set of multidimensional mandates defined by
the UN Security Council and General Assembly. Over the past decades, the design and goals of
peacekeeping have adapted alongside the perpetual shifts in global dynamics; and while each
peacekeeping mission is different for this very reason, there are often core ideals which define
them (UN Peacekeeping, 2023b). Three basic principles which have guided peacekeeping
throughout its development are (1) consent of parties, (2) impartiality, and (3) non-use of force
except in self-defense and defense of the mandate (UN Peacekeeping, 2023c). Accordingly, its
success in constructing resilient and long-term peace depends on collaboration and trust between
the UN and its host countries (UN Peacekeeping, 2023d). For this collaboration to function,
however, supporting every demographic of a vulnerable population is key, as the duty of
peacekeepers is to keep the peace for entire, not certain portions of, populations; because this
paper centers around sexual exploitation and abuse, of which women and girls are the primary
victims, the ways in which the UN attempts to incorporate a gendered lens into their
peacekeeping missions is vital to investigate.

Within the practice of peacekeeping exists an extensive history of exploiting women and girls—
time and time again, the gendered outcomes of various conflicts have been overlooked (Murphy,
This is in large part due to dominant media accounts portraying peacekeepers as infallible saviors, as well as an incomplete field of research in regards to gender-relations between peacekeepers and local women within host countries. The studies that have been done, however, show the existence of gendered effects of peacekeeping ventures through reports connecting military presence to increases of trafficking rings, commercial sex industries, and general reports of SEA in post-conflict zones (Henry and Higate, 2004; De Matos and Ward, 2012). At the turn of the twentieth century, the UN attempted to combat this inequity through gender mainstreaming. As the UN conceptualizes it, gender mainstreaming describes “the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programs, in all areas and at all levels” (UN Women, 2023). Implementing gender mainstreaming has been a crucial component in attempts to resolve violent conflict, given its inherently gendered aspects, e.g. patterns of systemic sexual violence in which women and girls are victims in the vast majority (Kreft, 2017).

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) was authorized in 2000 and played a particularly important role in the UN’s implementation of gender mainstreaming within conflict affected zones. The objective of this resolution was, and still is, to “reaffirm the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts…peace-building, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal…and full involvement” (United Nations, 2000), as well as centering the idea that a women-centric lens is key in fully realizing the duty of peacekeeping organizations to protect human rights of women and girls (United Nations, 2000).

2.3 UN Peacekeepers and Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
Sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) is an inescapable consequence of violent conflict, with few to no exceptions (Martin, 2005). Given that the role of peacekeepers is to protect any and all peace within host countries, it can therefore be understood that peacekeeping and SEA are inherently intertwined; in other words, because SEA is typically present within conflict zones, and because the presence of SEA within a community is contradictory to peace, peacekeepers and SEA are tied together through the duty of peacekeepers to deter SEA. With respect to the UN, SEA includes any breach of the Secretary General’s Bulletin’s definition of sexual
exploitation—“any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes” (United Nations, 2003)—or definition of sexual abuse—“the actual or threatened physical intrustion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions” (United nations, 2017). Unfortunately, providing protection against these atrocities to vulnerable populations is not the only way peacekeepers operate within the SEA context. In fact, SEA perpetrated by UN peacekeepers has been traced back to the 1990s and still continues today (Defeis, 2008). It was not until 2004, however, that this phenomenon broke through as an international discussion and subsequently as a significant topic of discussion in the UN Security Council meetings (Martin, 2005).

There are a number of possible explanations attempting to understand the persistent presence of SEA by peacekeepers deployed in conflict-ridden zones. A first factor brought up in research is cultural frameworks within the UN; the vast majority of personnel deployed in peacekeeping missions are military-trained men, accustomed to hyper-masculine military cultures defined by centuries of normative conceptions of gender within a male-dominated industry (Carreiras, 2010; Henry and Higate, 2004: p. 484). This becomes a problem in that hyper masculine culture grounds itself in “reducing women to [traditionally] feminine roles that are ascribed inferior status and power. Thereby the feminine is marginalized ideologically and institutionally” (Simić, 2010). This then embeds itself into peacekeeper identity, which cannot be isolated from peacekeeper-civilian relations (Simić, 2010). What’s more, previous research has argued that the empathy and impartiality encouraged by peacekeeping operations is often directly discouraged by traditional military training where it can be argued that the exact opposite attributes—e.g. aggression, instrumentality, etc.—are valued (Betts-Fetherston, 1998). This, in turn, leads to the penetration of militaristic values and subcultures into a decidedly peace-based organization, which research has linked as a contributing factor to peacekeeper SEA (Henry, 2019). Furthermore, in regards to cultural factors negatively affecting the embodiment of the peacekeeper ideal, previous research has also pointed to the power that national ideologies of contributing troops hold, particularly surrounding masculinity—pre-existing masculine ideals and expectations already ingrained within troops may be difficult to breach even with the best intentions (Henry and Higate, 2004: p. 485). In this way, it can be understood that military and various national ideals can influence peacekeeping missions with a hyper-masculine culture,
characterized by more aggressive and apathetic values. This then can translate into silence, tolerance, and complacency when it comes to misconduct in line with these hyper-masculine attitudes—conditions that decrease likelihood of consequence for sexual misconduct, and therefore heightened likelihood of SEA (Bahkti, 2019: p. 11). Thus, while the introduction of reforms like UNSCR 1325 aimed to “shape and regulate peacekeeper masculinity in terms of sexual expression (or aggression) and its potential impact on...local population” (Henry and Higate, 2004), the literature available points towards the fact that UN peacekeeping has, so far, been unsuccessful in paving the way out of this type of its internal hyper-masculine framework.

Another factor that has been researched in regards to the connection between PKOs and SEA is jurisdictional immunity, denoting that peacekeepers are protected from prosecution of alleged misconduct by the UN (Askin, 2016). According to the UN Charter, the primary theoretical basis backing immunity within this context is ‘functional necessity’, to allow for efficient and independent fulfillment of peacekeeping duties (Burke and Odello, 2016). More specifically, the Charter states that peacekeeper immunity is “restricted by [the UN’s] human rights obligations” (Freedman, 2014: 243), and intended to be functional—i.e. only applied to acts performed in the discharge of peacekeeper duties—rather than absolute—i.e. applied to all acts. Courts, however, have generally interpreted said immunity as absolute, a discrepancy which research within the field of SEA has interpreted as an indicator that “even if the UN’s immunity was conceived of as functional, it was codified as absolute” (Freedman, 2014: 243). This can be further understood given that UN officials are granted the right to waive immunities in cases where they believe impunity obstructs the rightful course of justice (Burke and Odello, 2016), however de facto impunity remains the norm (Smith, 2017). In terms of specifically sexual offenses, studies have resulted in similar conclusions: immunity continues to serve as a barricade to prosecution, resulting in impunity for peacekeepers when it comes to SEA-related crimes, as well (Burke and Odello, 2016). Consequently, this lack of internal barriers and consequences leads to a climate ultimately abetting sexual misconduct (Smith, 2017).

Vulnerability of the host population has also been studied as a possible explanation for SEA by peacekeepers. Many civilians experience poverty, loss of community, and live without strong institutional systems (e.g. corrupt judicial systems), all of which induce some level of
vulnerability, therefore heightening the risk of exploitation by those with more power (López Salvà, 2015). As civilians are often at least partially dependent on peacekeepers for certain aspects of safety and survival, possibility of exploitation is even further heightened and can range anywhere from coercive sexual abuse, thorough exchange of resources for sexual favors, to explicit sexual violence (Breslin, 2021). Additionally, many host countries experience higher rates of gender-based discrimination, which previous studies have correlated to a higher risk of sexual victimization (López Salvà, 2015).

Over the past decades, the UN has implemented policy intending to impede the issue of systemic SEA by its peacekeepers. The chief policy with respect to SEA is a the ‘zero tolerance’ policy, both in terms of tolerance against sexual crimes and tolerance against lack of investigation of said crimes. As defined by the UN Bulletin, this policy forbids “any sexual activity with minors or any actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions; any actual or attempted abuse of position of vulnerability, differential power or trust, for sexual purposes” (UN Peacekeeping, 2023e) by peacekeepers. While this may seem like a promising tool for change, the policy has in fact “neither improved accountability nor reduced the number of allegations of SEA” (Smith, 2017: p. 408). Additionally, as mentioned before, the UN also attempts to enforce several universal codes of conduct, alongside universal training of peacekeepers and awareness-raising initiatives, however no research has been able to correlate any of these endeavors to significant decrease of peacekeeper SEA (López Salvà, 2015: p. 11-13).

Previous research investigating SEA by peacekeepers has suggested multiple key factors which contribute to the ongoing issue of sexual misconduct within the UN. In contrast, this paper will turn inwards and focus on the UN’s conceptualization of sexual misconduct of peacekeepers, rather than defining it or its causes.

3. Theoretical Framework

In this section, framing theory will be presented as the theoretical framework in which this study is grounded. The way an issue is ‘framed’ has a profound effect on how international organizations, states, and civil society understand its dynamics, including where responsibility is
located and the relationships between different actors (Crawford, 2013). Thus, through analyzing internal dynamics and narratives within various UN materials, is framing a relevant and advantageous approach to exploring how the UN views SEA perpetrated by its peacekeepers.

### 3.1 Framing Theory

The way information is perceived is subjective; the perspective from which stories are told and which details are highlighted can transform the way people understand them. The narrative surrounding sexual misconduct of peacekeepers is no different— which aspects of peacekeeper SEA are highlighted vs. suppressed, and which actors are centered, alter public opinion immensely. *Framing theory* provides an approach to understanding these different ways in which a narrative can be presented, describing the process of emphasizing certain factors of an issue or event and how this emphasis leads to the construction of a certain narrative. In more specific terms, “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient [i.e. noticeable] in a communicating text, in such a way to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993: p. 52). A ‘frame’, therefore, is a specific perspective, or “set of dimensions, that affect an individual’s evaluation” (Chong and Druckman, 2007: p. 105). For example, the dominant frame of a given social group may place high value on free speech, and this frame will affect how the group evaluates an ‘opposing’ group’s right to rally; even if the two groups differ greatly in ideology, the frame accepted by the first group places more value on free speech of the other group than their ideological disagreement.

Frames include four possible functions: (1) to *define problems* through determining causal agents of an issue or event, as well as its costs and benefits in terms of cultural values, (2) to *diagnose causes* through identifying sources of a problem/s, (3) to *make moral judgments* through evaluating causal agents and their effects, and (4) to *suggest remedies* through suggesting, justifying, and predicting the outcome of possible solutions (Entman, 1993: p. 52). While certain frames perform all four functions simultaneously, the combination of functions at work within a frame can differ depending on circumstance. The ways in which these functions are manifested can also differ— presence or lack of information sources, text placement, and cultural symbols are just a few examples of different methods to employ a given function (Entman 1993). Within this
study, using these tenets of framing as a framework will provide a direct and transparent approach to investigating UN narrative of peacekeeper sexual misconduct.

When it comes to communicating a given frame within society, there exist at least four locations in which this is done: (1) the communicators, who (conscious or unconscious) contribute to what is included in the frame, (2) the text, which contain the frame, (3) the receivers, who take in the frame in question (but are not inherently affected by it), and (4) the culture, which is a combination of all frames present within a given society. Each of these locations serve as different channels through which the four functions of frames can be expressed (Entamn, 1993). This study primarily focuses on the communicators and the text, as its aim is to understand which frames the communicators, i.e. the UN, uses when conceptualizing SEA, and the process by which this will be done is by analyzing textual material which contain these frames.

Framing theory thus provides a framework for understanding the existence of multiple narratives grounded in a single issue or event, including the processes by which these narratives are formed and the ways in which people (re)orient their thinking to include these narratives (Chong and Druckman, 2007). Framing theory in the context of this thesis, then, will be used to determine narrative(s) used by the UN when it comes to SEA.

3.2 Analytical Framework
Using framing theory discussed above, I will first outline the ways in which general understandings of sexual violence are framed, in order to give a foundation to frame SEA by peacekeepers in conflict zones. This is relevant in that societal frames of sexual violence as a general concept are likely to inform the frames the UN uses to conceptualize sexual violence within its specific context. Drawing on this, I will then use a narrower lens to provide multiple possible frames through which the UN may view SEA by its peacekeepers.

3.2.1 Framing Sexual Violence
Sexual violence against women is a phenomenon widely discussed in the public sphere. While the UN is the communicator of their own frame(s) of internally perpetuated sexual violence, the media is the primary communicator of frames of societal sexual violence as a whole. Because of
this, researchers have often chosen to study frames used by media to portray sexual violence as a gateway through which to better understand the ways sexual violence is understood societally. These studies have recognized that media portrayals repeatedly reflect patriarchal values, constructing versions of ‘reality’ that favor those in power, e.g. men, of whom account for a majority of perpetrators and a minority of victims. These portrayals, or frames, are often disguised in the form of ‘neutrality’, yet present sexual violence as isolated incidents rather than a systemic problem, and use victim-centric lenses rather than the offender-centric. Thus are systemic conditions often rendered invisible and offenders are often left in the background of narratives (Easteal, et. al., 2015; Aroustamian, 2019).

Turning the focus towards research based in framing theory specifically, previous studies have suggested four frames through which media portrays sexual violence: the initiator frame, the judicial frame, the social science frame, and the victim frame. The initiator frame focuses on, and even rationalizes, the behavior of the perpetrator, as opposed to the damages of the victim; the judicial frame relies on legal policies and statutes as moral guidance; the social science frame attempts to remain objective and neutral, taking into account multiple perspectives; finally, the victim frame emphasises the harms experienced by the victim(s), with a significant focus on understanding social and cultural conditions which enable sexual violence (Aroustamian, 2019).

The portrayal of sexual violence above has been presented to act as a framework in which the framing of SEA by peacekeepers executed in this study can be grounded in. While the frames presented in the next subsection are not identical to those relating to sexual violence, they draw upon this framing of and general portrayal of sexual violence as relevant points of departure.

3.2.2 Framing Sexual Misconduct of Peacekeepers

When conducting my study, there are multiple frames I expect may be relevant based on previous literature within the field of SEA and peacekeeping, as well as framing theory. The following paragraphs and tables will operationalize each frame using the four main principles of framing theory. Given this, it is important to note that as I analyze the relevant material in this study, I will not discount other possible frames which may present themselves.
The first frame I propose I have labeled the *Rotten Apple Frame*. The phrase ‘rotten apple’ is used to refer to one– usually morally– corrupt individuals, who are regarded as the fundamental source of trouble within the organization they belong to; the frame describes the narrative that individual peacekeepers’ moral corruption is the source of peacekeeper SEA, and is therefore labeled as such. To tie this idea back to previous research within SEA, the frame can be related to the previously mentioned *Initiator Frame* in that it focuses on a single perpetrator and their behavior, and even further related to previous research within sexual violence, as mentioned above, ignoring systemic patterns, and focusing on isolated incidents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Defined problem</th>
<th>Diagnosed cause</th>
<th>Moral judgment</th>
<th>Suggested remedy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Who or what are framed as the main causal agents of peacekeeper SEA and whom is it a problem for?</em></td>
<td><em>What are framed as the sources of peacekeeper SEA?</em></td>
<td><em>How can peacekeeper SEA and its causal agents be morally evaluated within the frame?</em></td>
<td><em>What are the possible and/or suggested solutions to peacekeeper SEA within the frame?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Operational definition of the Rotten Apple Frame</strong></td>
<td>Individual peacekeepers’ sexual misconduct</td>
<td>Emphasizes un-systemic flaws of peacekeepers on an individual level</td>
<td>Problematic, unacceptable on an individual level, yet no moral judgment of UN as an institution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1: Operationalization of The Rotten Apple Frame*

The second frame I suggest is labeled the *Internal Incompetence Frame*. This frame is characterized by systemic patterns within the UN body, namely lack of competent oversight and policy, which allow space for peacekeeper SEA to arise and persist; the responsibility within this frame is then located on a larger scale– within the administrative, policy, and punitive levels– rather than on an individual peacekeeping personnel.
Table 2: Operationalization of The Internal Incompetence Frame

The third and final frame I expect to possibly come forth has been labeled the *Consequence of Conflict* frame. This is the most passive frame in that neither places blame on individuals or the institution of the UN, but rather views SEA as an unavoidable consequence within conflict zones which is still understood as immoral and can attempt to be curbed, yet is not expected to be eradicated given its context. In this light, responsibility is neither a systemic nor un-systemic issue– it is merely an inherent aspect of the environment in which peacekeeping takes place.
is it a problem for?

the frame?

frame?

| Operational definition of the Consequences of Conflict Frame | Conflict as the problem, where SEA, including sexual misconduct by peacekeepers, is considered an almost passive byproduct | Emphasizing the context of conflict as the cause, rather than flaws within individuals or the UN as an institution | Attempting to curb harm through existing policy, etc., however having an underlying understanding that there is no remedy which will completely eradicate SEA by peacekeepers |

Table 3: Operationalization of The Consequences of Conflict

4. Methodology

In this thesis, I employ a form of qualitative research, a methodology which interprets concepts to further the understanding of social issues through extracting meaning from texts or objects (Mays and Pope, 1995). More specifically, I employ a form of qualitative content analysis: qualitative frame analysis, which utilizes framing theory as a methodological strategy to construct and process elements of a discourse (Pan and Kosicki, 1993). Below, I will provide a comprehensive overview of this methodological approach.

4.1 Qualitative Frame Analysis

In essence, “qualitative framing analysis involves repeated and extensive engagement with a text and looks holistically at the material to identify frames” (Broadway and Connolly-Ahern, 2008: p. 369). Thus, through examining key words and metaphors, and examining what is included versus excluded, a frame can be uncovered and understood (Linström and Marais, 2012).

A more in-depth account of this method shows that it uses the principles of framing theory as a tool to describe communication content (e.g. texts), compare communication content to the ‘real world’, and establish a starting point for further studies to understand effects of communication content (Linström and Marais, 2012). As a methodology, framing is argued to distinguish itself...
from other qualitative approaches in multiple ways. Most critically, it views communicative content as consisting of “organized symbolic devices that interact with an individual agent’s…meaning constriction” (Pan and Kosicki, 1993; p. 58), and through this, systematically gathers data within communicative content in order to identify elements which are likely to signify meaning to consumers. Thus is this methodology applicable to my study, as the study centers itself around constructing meaning through extracting critical information within the analyzed material.

Using the method detailed above, I will analyze a variety of UN-written materials which all, in one way or another, correspond to the crisis of SEA by peacekeepers. I have chosen to categorize results by the corresponding operationalized frames above in order to provide structure to my study, however provide an additional sub-section analyzing results which fall outside of these frames. In summary, material will be analyzed through repeated rereading, categorizing both presence and lack of key words and phrases either in accordance with the operationalized frames above or, if necessary, as new frames.

4.2 Materials
This material analyzed in this study consists of UN press releases, reports, transcribed interviews, and policy documents. The range of materials intends to provide multiple angles from which to analyze the UN’s framing of its peacekeepers’ misconduct, as it utilizes multiple textual forms of communication from multiple UN actors.

As mentioned, from multiple angles, each document presents UN perspective and narrative surrounding SEA of their peacekeepers. The analyzed material consists of the following: two press releases touching on peacekeeper perpetrated SEA in different contexts of discussion, one report on the 2019 approach to prevention of SEA by peacekeepers, one transcribed interview of the UN’s first Victims’ Rights Advocate, Jane Connors, and one policy document describing measures for protection from peacekeeper SEA. The first press release is titled Delegates Stress Need to Adequately Fund Peacekeeping, Urge Agreement on Financing Device for Peacekeeping Activities, as Fifth Committee Begins Resumed Session and discusses, among other aspects of peacekeeping, the need to prevent SEA; the second is titled The Secretary-General announces
Task Force on UN response to sexual exploitation and abuse and discusses the introduction of certain measures within the UN to combat SEA. These press releases are vital contributions to the list of material analyzed in that they provide crucial insight into the UN’s frames, through the ways in which the UN communicates with the public. Also included in the list of materials is a report titled Special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse: a new approach, which discusses peacekeeper SEA in terms of a variety of contexts in which it is present within the scope of the UN, and measures in place to combat it. This piece of material is key in understanding UN framing, as it highlights how the UN conceptualizes SEA on a large scale, across multiple contexts. The next piece of material included is a transcribed interview titled ‘Extremely difficult conversations’: Seeking justice for sexual abuse victims. This interview highlights the perspective of the UN’s Victim’s Rights Advocate and allows for insight into the sector of the UN specifically tasked with keeping a victim-centered approach relevant within the discourse. The following piece of material analyzed in this thesis is the Secretary-General’s Bulletin Special measures for protection from sexual violence and sexual abuse– a document both defining ‘sexual exploitation’ and disclosing policy related to the prohibition of SEA by UN personnel. As stated, the variety of materials included in this thesis intends to provide engagement with UN ideology through multiple channels, in order to uncover dominant frames within this context in a comprehensive and unbiased manner. The final piece of material is a text titled Addressing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. This text details the UN’s history of and current responses to the crisis of SEA within its personnel.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Results

In this section, I will first present the results of this study by discussing how, if at all, each of the previously operationalized frames presented themselves, as well as if any further frames came forth, in terms of the four tenets of framing analysis: defined problem, diagnosed cause, moral judgment, and suggested remedy. Each of the following subsections detail a single frame and the ways in which the material displayed the presence–or lack thereof– of each frame.
5.1.1 The Rotten Apples Frame

As previously articulated, the *Rotten Apple Frame* is characterized by placing responsibility of peacekeeper perpetuated SEA on an individual, rather than systemic, level. While this frame did not prove to be the most dominant frame within UN narrative surrounding SEA, it appears repeatedly throughout the analyzed material, and is therefore relevant nonetheless. One press release paraphrases the Under-Secretary-General and Special Coordinator on Improving the United Nations Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, Chistian Saunders’, words, exemplifying the presence of this frame:

“The **vast majority** of personnel...**uphold the Organization's standards** and work with pride and purpose, often in **harsh and dangerous conditions**” - *United Nations, 2023*

The quote underscores the idea that the ‘vast majority’ of peacekeeping personnel abide by UN standards. This pushes the narrative that existing policy within the UN is sufficient and that the ‘harsh and dangerous conditions’ in which peacekeepers are deployed are not relevant factors in the perpetration of SEA. These key phrases thus lead to the conclusion that responsibility is located with the *minority* who deviate from the majority, pushing the idea that neither UN policy nor conditions of conflict zones significantly influence SEA. The problem is therefore understood to lie with individual peacekeepers, caused by un-systemic flaws within these individuals. Both the problem and cause can be clearly understood from this context, yet the moral judgment and suggested remedy are clearly articulated in the Secretary-General’s 2003 Bulletin:

“Sexual exploitation and sexual abuse violate...norms and standards and **have always been unacceptable** behavior and **prohibited** conduct for United Nations staff” - *Kofi Annan, 2003*

“**Head of Department, Office or Mission shall be responsible** for taking appropriate action in cases where there is reason to believe that any of the standards...above have been violated” - *Kofi Annan, 2003*

The first quote underscores the moral judgment well – it states that ‘norms and standards’ have always prohibited SEA, and therefore are sufficient. This exemplifies the narrative that judgment
shall be placed upon individuals who break such norms and standards and that UN policy is not at fault. The second quote, however, can be misinterpreted without contextual clues. Without the preceding quote as context, it may be interpreted that possible solutions to peacekeeper SEA lie in the hands of UN administrative forces, however, this is not so. On the contrary, the statement suggests that administrative forces are responsible for carrying out policy which is already in place. In other words, punishment of individuals according to existing policy is the suggested remedy.

5.1.2 The Internal Incompetence Frame

The Internal Incompetence Frame presented itself the most within UN framing of peacekeeper SEA, characterized by emphasizing systemic issues within the UN body and placing responsibility on UN administrative powers and policy, specifically. One press interview, alongside the 2003 Secretary-General’s Bulletin and an interview with the UN’s Victim’s Rights’ Advocate, Jane Connors, exemplifies this:

“It is a joint responsibility of Member States and the UN to make sure that the rights of children [conceived by SEA] are realized” - Connors, 2023

“The Head of Department, Office or Mission, as appropriate, shall be responsible for creating and maintaining an environment that prevents sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, and shall take appropriate measures for this purpose” - Kofi Annan, 2003

“If we are to eliminate sexual misconduct from within the UN system, it requires recognition that this is a core responsibility of each [humanitarian] organization and considered an integral part of the cost of doing business” - United Nations, 2023A

All three quotes demonstrate a clear sentiment that the UN body shall be responsible for responding to the issue of sexual misconduct within the peacekeeping sector. This narrative portrayal points towards the organization of the UN as the problem, that the lack of sufficient measures and services in place as the cause. Moral judgment is also implied here through “recognition that it is a core responsibility of each [humanitarian] organization” to “eliminate sexual misconduct” (United Nations, 2023A), and through the idea that administrative forces are
to be responsible for “creating and maintaining an environment that prevents sexual exploitation” (Annan, 2003). The remedy within this frame is also reflected in a two press release highlighting the Secretary-General’s views, in an addition to the interview with Connors:

“The Secretary-General…asked…for **improving the [UN] Organization’s response to sexual exploitation and abuse**, to convene a high-level task force to develop as a matter of urgency, a clear, game-changing strategy to achieve visible and measurable improvement in the Organization’s approach to preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse” - United Nations, 2017

“I’d like to see much more focus on behavior change. It takes a lot of work, **sustained resources**, and **huge leadership to make something unacceptable**” - Connors, 2023

“The **need for system-wide staff resources** dedicated to the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, on risk management, on victim services, on the timely completion of investigations, and on the implementation of effective accountability measures” - United Nations, 2023A

“The UN remains resolute in **ensuring ever more effective means** to prevent and address [SEA]” - United Nations, 2023B

Each of the above quotes display the suggested remedy– and in certain cases moral judgment– within the *Internal Incompetence Frame* multidimensionally. “Improving the [UN] Organization’s response to SEA” (United Nations, 2017) clearly emphasizes the need for systemic reform within the UN. Similarly, the “need for system-wide staff resources” (United Nations, 2023A), articulates that these resources are not already in place, or at least that current resources are insufficient. This also points towards a remedy of systemic change. Connors’ statement, on the other hand, is more easily misunderstood, however also comes to similar conclusions with further analysis; at first glance, the phrase “focus on changing behavior within the UN” (Connors, 2023) may be interpreted on an individual level, yet when framed by context clues, her sentiment can only be understood systemically– the mention of ‘sustained resources’ and ‘leadership’ point towards a call for systemic shift in behavior, paved by leaders of a group, and hence not individually. Her statement, therefore, suggests a remedy focused on systemic
behavior change within the UN body. A final analysis of the above quotes points towards moral judgment; the fact that the “UN remains resolute in ensuring more effective means to prevent and address SEA” (United nations, 2023B) highlights the idea that judgment falls upon the UN. This can be seen through the ‘resolution’ to continue addressing SEA, implying that the current systems in place are inadequate and allow SEA to continue, and are therefore immoral.

5.1.3 The Consequences of Conflict Frame
The Consequences of Conflict frame is defined by a passive understanding of peacekeeper SEA, framing the environment of conflict zones as the force responsible. This frame was found the least within UN discourse. However, it still presented itself in certain ways. For example:

“In particular, the impacts of war…heighten the risk of such [SEA] behaviors” - United Nations, 2023A

“Despite clear gains, allegations of exploitation and abuse involving all personnel categories sadly continue to emerge in 2022. This conduct is rooted in abuse of power, gender inequality, violence, entrenched harmful practices, and situations of vulnerability caused by economic and social disparities” - United Nations, 2023A

The quotes above, taken from a 2023 press release, suggest that context plays a role in the presence of SEA. Claiming that impacts of war generally heighten risk of SEA behaviors, supports the framing of environmental factors as a problem and cause. Moral judgment and remedy are, however, not clearly clarified within the presentation of this frame. Segments can be pulled from material stating that existing policy is an important factor in curbing SEA and the harms it inflicts, however upon further analysis, these segments are more applicable to the Rotten Apple Frame. This can be seen through contextual clues, which express that existing policy focuses on punishing individual peacekeepers who, rather than falling victim to their environment, are at fault for misconduct. Hence, while the Consequences of Conflict frame is touched upon within the analyzed material, the frame as a whole is not fully realized. Thus is this frame relatively insignificant when it comes to the UN’s narrative surrounding SEA.
5.1.4 Further Findings

While all three suggested operationalized frames were found to an extent within the analyzed material, a fourth frame presented itself through the analysis: the Multilateral Frame. This frame likens the Internal Incompetence Frame, yet operates on a much larger scale. As the name suggests, the frame places responsibility not only with the UN body, but also with UN member states, as well as other humanitarian organizations working in peacekeeping contexts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Defined problem</th>
<th>Diagnosed cause</th>
<th>Moral judgment</th>
<th>Suggested remedy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who or what are framed as the main causal agents of peacekeeper SEA and whom is it a problem for?</td>
<td>What are framed as the sources of peacekeeper SEA?</td>
<td>How can peacekeeper SEA and its causal agents be morally evaluated within the frame?</td>
<td>What are the possible and/or suggested solutions to peacekeeper SEA within the frame?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Operational definition of the Multilateral Frame**

- UN administrative powers, UN member states, and other humanitarian organizations
- Emphasizes systemic problems within peacekeeping culture and policy generally, not only within the UN, but within all participating powers
- Judgment focused on the UN and other humanitarian organizations as institutions, as well as participation of member states, suggesting systemic immorality, rather than placing blame on individuals
- Systemic change on an institutional levels, e.g. policy, including the communication and work between institutions/states

*Table 4: Operationalization of The Multilateral Frame*

This frame can be found within the analyzed material, and is highlighted by the following quotes:
“The present report contains updates...on prioritizing...engaging Member States, civil society, and external partners” - Guterres, 2019

“...established an inter-agency working group to improve the [UN] Organization’s approach to facilitating paternity claims arising from sexual exploitation and abuse” - Guterres, 2019

“I welcome the strengthening of partnerships with Member States...given that it is our shared responsibility to protect and assist victims and whistle-blowers, and to take appropriate action against perpetrators [of SEA]” - Guterres, 2019

“If, after proper investigation, there is evidence to support allegations of sexual exploitation or sexual abuse, these cases may, upon consultation with the Office of Legal Affairs, be referred to national authorities [i.e. relevant Member States] for criminal prosecution” - Annan, 2003

“The UN remains committed to working together with Member States to ensure that all UN personnel...are accountable for their actions” - United Nations, 2023B

The quotes above serve to underscore the importance of a multilateral approach to addressing SEA and present a framework for understanding that responsibility lies with not only the UN body, but also its Member States and fellow humanitarian organizations. The problem and cause of this frame are clearly defined as the mentioned powers and their lack of systemic competence. The moral judgment is also focused on these powers, rather than individuals or the environment in which they operate. Remedy is also clearly suggested in the “strengthening of partnerships” (Guterres, 2019) and establishment of inter-agency collaboration.

5.2 Discussion

The research questions of this thesis aims to understand the ways in which the UN frames sexual misconduct– otherwise labeled SEA– by its peacekeeping personnel and where responsibility for these crimes is located. Three frames were suggested as a possible framework for analyzing material, however four different frames were ultimately found– the Rotten Apple Frame, the Internal Incompetence Frame, the Consequences of War Frames, and the Multilateral Frame. Two of the frames derived from the study presented themselves most prominently: the Internal
Incompetence Frame, which places responsibility of peacekeeper SEA with UN policy and administrative powers, and the Multilateral Frame, which places this responsibility not only with UN powers but also with UN Member States and other humanitarian organizations. Because of the similarity of these frames, it may be tempting to view the former frame as a part of the latter—in other words, understanding the former to be an incomplete version of the latter. However, this would be a mistake. Viewing the UN as the sole agent responsible for the persistence of SEA suggests a completely different frame than a narrative in which the UN shares responsibility with other agents—the difference being that either the UN attempts to reform their systems to entirely resolve the issue SEA, or that the UN takes a collective approach, attempting reform both within their own systems and in the systems of other actors. Yet this does not mean that the two frames cannot coexist. Rather, the substantial presence of both can bring about greater understanding of the UN’s narrative in framing SEA as systemic. Above all, the simultaneous presence of the two frames indicates that the UN is chiefly responsible for SEA by its peacekeepers, while Member States and fellow humanitarian organizations are essential supporting actors which share this responsibility. In this way, the interaction of the two frames can be understood.

Given the analysis above, the prominence of framing SEA as a systemic issue is clear, yet framing SEA as an un-systemic issue also exists within the UN’s narrative. This may seem counterintuitive at first glance, however it is, in fact, possible to view the issue of SEA as systemic in certain ways and un-systemic in others. The presence of the Rotten Apple Frame exemplifies this; while not the predominant frame, it still assumes an important role in the narrative of the UN. Throughout the analyzed material, this frame recurs, pushing the idea that individual peacekeepers hold a certain responsibility for SEA, alongside the body of the UN. While seemingly opposites, these ideas coexist well, as responsibility can be located in more places than one, i.e. systemically to a certain extent, and un-systemically given that systemic responsibility is functional. Put simply, the simultaneous presence of these two types of frames suggest the following: that primary responsibility is placed upon institutional actors to create and uphold functional systems, while secondary responsibility falls upon individual peacekeepers to abide by these systems.
The *Consequences of Conflict Frame* presented itself through certain minor channels in the results, yet was not prominent enough to provide the necessary evidence to claim that the UN consistently frames SEA in this way. However, despite its lack of eminence, it would be a mistake to completely exclude this frame from the analysis of results. Rather, viewing the pieces of this frame which showed themselves as supplemental to major frames, helps to uncover the narrative. In this way, the following conclusion can be drawn: the UN narrative takes into consideration the harsh environment of peacekeeping, yet does not allow it to define the narrative. Therefore, while the *Consequences of Conflict Frame* gives greater insight into the nuances of UN perspective, it cannot be said that the UN understands conflict zones to be responsible for SEA.

In summary, this study revealed the *Internal Incompetence Frame* and the *Multilateral Frame* to set the stage for the UN’s framing of peacekeeper SEA. Through this, it can be seen that systemic incompetence is framed as the root of the issue. The *Rotten Apple Frame* then adds another layer: that although systemic responsibility is key, individual responsibility is not to be completely discounted; when systems and policy are made to be functional, there is a secondary responsibility placed upon individual peacekeepers to uphold the standards. Finally, the *Consequences of Conflict Frame* adds certain insight into the nuanced perspective of the UN, in that the UN can be observed taking the environment of conflict zones into account, yet it cannot be said that the UN realizes this frame within its narrative.

**6. Conclusion**

The aim of this thesis was to understand the UN’s internal narrative concerning the sexual misconduct of UN peacekeepers, with a specific emphasis on where responsibility is located. This focus was realized through a framing analysis of UN-issued material addressing SEA, searching for defined problems, diagnosed causes, moral judgment, and suggested remedies within this context. Consequently, four frames were identified, each alluding to different values systems and representations of the issue in question. Among the four frames identified in the material, certain frames presented themselves much more dominantly than others within the narrative, suggesting that the UN narrative surrounding peacekeepers SEA consists of multiple perspectives, yet emphasizes certain perspectives significantly over others. The two dominant
frames—the *Internal Incompetence Frame* and the *Multilateral Frame*—conclude that systemic problems are the focus of UN narrative; neither the UN alone nor the UN among other authoritative actors (e.g. UN Member States and other humanitarian organizations) have adequate structure and policy to properly counter SEA in peacekeeping contexts. This inadequacy—chiefly within the UN body and secondarily by its supporting actors—is thus viewed by the UN as the primary factor behind sexual misconduct. The presence of the *Rotten Apple Frame* then adds a layer of nuance to UN portrayal of SEA, through the understanding that when functional systems and policy are in place, it is the responsibility of individual peacekeepers to uphold their standards.

The aim of this thesis was to make a small contribution to the existing field of research regarding SEA perpetrated by UN peacekeepers. Through the study conducted above, a small gap in research has been filled, taking a step closer to understanding how the realities of SEA are understood. However, there is more left to do in order to provide a complete and nuanced picture of the ways SEA is framed; given that this study focuses specifically on sexual misconduct of UN peacekeepers specifically, the results are not generalizable to the ways the UN frames sexual misconduct within its other branches, nor how other humanitarian organizations frame such misconduct. Likewise, the ways in which vulnerable populations of UN host countries frame SEA, including where the responsibility of addressing SEA is located, has not been included within this study. As such, further research is recommended in these spaces in order to gain greater understanding of the ways that misconduct, both sexual and other, is framed across the many factions of the humanitarian field, therefore making sense of peacekeeping from a more comprehensive perspective.
References


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Appendix

Analyzed Materials

Press Releases


Reports

Transcribed Interviews

Bulletins

Other