



# Sexual exploitation and abuse in UN peacekeeping operations

The problem of United Nations (UN) peacekeeper involvement in sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) against local populations exploded into public consciousness in the early 2000s. The United Nations subsequently formulated strategies to combat this, including a zero-tolerance policy that prohibits UN personnel from exchanging money, goods, etc for sex, and from having sex with anyone under 18 years-old; and it “strongly discourages” any sexual relationship between UN personnel and locals, on the grounds that these are de facto exploitative. This project examined the institutional ramifications and preliminary impacts of the zero-tolerance policy in the UN peacekeeping missions in Haiti and Liberia.

## Central questions

- Peacekeeping missions consist of personnel from a wide range of countries with diverse cultural, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds. Given this diversity, how can a highly normative and contested policy be effectively implemented?
- Peacekeeping missions occur in areas with widespread poverty, joblessness, and extremely distorted economies, where sex work or “sugar daddy” relationships with internationals may be one of the few reliable sources of income. How does this affect implementation of the zero-tolerance policy?

## Key findings

- Current attempts to enforce the zero-tolerance policy mostly depend on individual personnel reporting on the misconduct of their colleagues. This is clearly insufficient. Informants claimed that many of the activities banned – such as prostitution – are essentially “victimless crimes” or private matters, and most said they wouldn’t want to “rat out” their colleagues. Many informants would not report on banned behavior unless it involved violence, force, or sex with under-16s. The zero-tolerance policy will thus not be effectively implemented until SEA prevention and enforcement is systematically integrated and prioritized within existing activities being conducted by missions.
- The zero-tolerance policy can unintentionally perpetuate (or introduce) racial, gendered, or cultural stereotypes about the local population or fellow UN colleagues. Training related to the policy should not generalize about perceived sexual norms of locals, or indulge in inaccurate scare tactics about the HIV prevalence rate.
- The “strongly discouraged” clause is both practically and ethically problematic. Either more guidance is needed on how to implement it, or the clause should be discarded.

## Researcher:



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