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Born between war and peace: Situating peacekeeper-fathered children in research on children born of war

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In the last two decades, academic research has made significant progress exploring the life courses of so-called "children born of war" (CBOW). Similarly, the unintended consequences of peacekeeping operations, including the experiences of victims of sexual exploitation and abuse, and children born of these interactions, have received preliminary academic attention. This paper compares peacekeeper-fathered children (PKFC) to other CBOW to determine how these two groups relate to one another. We draw on research conducted in two peacekeeping contexts where personnel have been accused of fathering and abandoning children (Haiti and the Democratic Republic of Congo) to empirically situate PKFC within the category of CBOW. We introduce 5,388 micro-narratives from Haitian and Congolese community members (Haiti $n = 2{,}541$, DRC $= 2{,}858$) and 113 qualitative interviews with mothers/grandmothers of PKFC (Haiti $n = 18$, DRC $n = 60$) and PKFC (DRC $n = 35$) to investigate how PKFC fit in the CBOW paradigm. Our findings demonstrate that many of the multi-level adversities faced by PKFC resemble those of the broader reference group. Given their shared developmental needs and experiences of exclusion, we conclude that PKFC constitute CBOW and ought to be included in conceptualisations pertaining to them. Acknowledging PKFC as CBOW offers new opportunities for policy development to (a) enhance protection and support of all CBOW and (b) remind states of their commitments to uphold the rights of all children.

KEYWORDS

children born of war, peacekeeper-fathered children, United Nations, peacekeeping, sexual abuse, children's rights, Haiti, Democratic Republic of the Congo

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Introduction

> My father left my mother while she was pregnant, and my mother gave birth to me when he had already left. I don't talk to him now. When I see other children with their fathers, I feel bad. I feel hurt when I see MONUSCO agents passing by because other children have their fathers, but I don't have mine [...] People call me "daughter of a bitch." When they do, I feel hurt and shocked about it. I do feel like I belong here, but people talk so much. They say that they will chase me because I am a foreigner [...] I would like to tell him[father] to think about me wherever he is. He needs to know that he left me in DR Congo. I am suffering. He should know that I don't have a family. If my mother dies, who will raise me? (Mado[1], 10–15 years old).

Since the 1990s, widespread reports implicating United Nations (UN) peacekeepers in the sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) of local populations have raised concerns regarding the work of the UN and the effectiveness of Peacekeeping Operations (PKOs). Related to these allegations, journalists brought the issue of paternity claims resulting from SEA to public attention (Powell, 2001). Due to the socio-economic and political insecurity in regions where missions operate, peacekeeper-fathered children (PKFC)—like Mado—are often conceived within unequal economic, power, and gender relations that are further reflected in the children's circumstances growing up.

Mado's father, a Uruguayan peacekeeper accused of perpetrating SEA during his deployment in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), left the UN-mission in Beni before Mado was born. Mado's mother, a Congolese civilian who started exchanging sexual services in return for daily goods as a minor, has been deeply affected by the socio-economic consequences of her pregnancy. To provide Mado with food, clothes and provisional shelter, she continues to engage in transactional sex with peacekeepers. Since she has yet to receive any support from the father or his military, she is unable to meet Mado's more long-term needs including her education.

The above snapshot highlights the complex relationships PKFC have with their families and communities. Affiliated with a force deployed to serve and protect civilians, Mado describes the far-reaching implications of being conceived through SEA, including the stigma associated with her identity. She relates her experience with ostracization and exclusion both to her mother's status in society (she is called the "daughter of a bitch") and her father's foreign background (she is chased for being a "foreigner"). Set apart from local children by her parentage, limited familial network and access to resources, she draws comparisons to her peers, who have relationships with their fathers, and live in better financial situations. Her comments suggest that she attributes her adverse conditions to her father's absence and longs to be reunited with him in order to improve her circumstances. In communicating her adversities on multiple interacting levels (identity issues, lack of care and protection, socio-economic discrimination), Mado's story draws parallels to the difficult position of children born of war (CBOW) globally.

The emergence of CBOW as a field of academic interest has led to a small but growing body of work that conceptualizes the lives of individuals who are born as a result of sexual relations between a soldier (member of a warring faction, paramilitary group, rebel or any other person directly participating in warfare) and a community member (Mochmann and Larsen, 2008; Mochmann and Lee, 2010; Lee and Glaesmer, 2021). The theoretical framing of CBOW includes children fathered by peacekeeping forces, therefore, it has often been assumed that PKFC's context of conception and related needs mirror those of other CBOW groups. However, the life courses of PKFC are vastly under-studied and little is known regarding how their childhood and adolescence experiences compare to those described in the CBOW literature (Carpenter, 2007; Mochmann and Larsen, 2008; Mochmann and Lee, 2010). Despite recent advances in understanding their unique connection to post-conflict communities (Vahedi et al., 2020; Wagner et al., 2020, 2022a,b), to date, neither the UN, civil society organizations nor academia have investigated how PKFC are situated amongst those more traditionally recognized as CBOW (Lee and Glaesmer, 2021).

As a comparatively recent phenomenon, there appears to be a disconnect between the categorization of PKFC in different streams of academic literature and policy engagement. While CBOW scholars have considered PKFC part of the CBOW paradigm, in the peacekeeping literature the terminology has not been applied consistently. This discrepancy is illustrated in UN policies which argue that PKFC's needs are better reflected in protocols for victims of peacekeeper-perpetrated SEA than CBOW, referring to children like Mado as "children born of SEA" (UN General Assembly, 2022). This framing is common in writings on SEA, arguably denying PKFC their own identity and limiting those born of consensual sexual relations their rights to support. While employing a policy-oriented perspective that focuses on procedural gaps in providing victims of SEA with assistance is essential in shaping more appropriate responses to PKFC wellbeing, considering them secondary victims of exploitation/abuse may limit the focus on them as a category of war-affected populations with distinct needs and rights (Simić and O'Brien, 2014; Blau, 2016). Hence, there is a gap between the theoretical understanding of PKFC in the CBOW literature on the one side, and the political understanding of "children born of SEA" in peacekeeping on the other. This article addresses this gap and advances the categorization of

1 Mado, a pseudonym, participated in semi-structured interviews in the DRC in 2018.

PKFC by introducing empirical evidence on their life courses that informs broader conceptual questions regarding how PKFC should be recognized and protected through international legal mechanisms and regulations. Based on original research from Haiti (2017) and the DRC (2018) we empirically situate PKFC in the CBOW literature and describe how they fit into the current nomenclatura and broader CBOW category.

Literature review

Peacekeeper-fathered children

Sexual relations between peacekeepers and beneficiaries of assistance are prohibited by the UN's zero tolerance policy (UN Secretariat, 2003); however, such relations have repeatedly resulted in children being conceived between members of UN peacekeeping forces and local women and girls (Simić and O'Brien, 2014; Lee and Bartels, 2019). PKFC may be conceived through comparatively consensual relationships, including dating and long-term partnerships, through transactional interactions, or through sexually abusive acts, including rape or sexual abuse of a child[2]. Given that peacekeeping occurs in a context of armed conflict and insecurity, scholars have queried the degree to which individuals can give free and informed consent to engage in sexual relations with peacekeepers, arguing that most sexual interactions in these contexts are exploitative (Burke, 2014; Mudgway, 2017). Others have argued that positioning all sexual interactions between peacekeepers and locals as exploitative denies women's agency and oversimplifies the complicated relations all humans navigate in making decisions about sex (Simić, 2013).

While the issue of sexual misconduct by peacekeepers has attracted significant academic attention, the children born as a result have not. Preliminary evidence suggests that local populations in areas of UNPK deployment have coined terms referring to children fathered by peacekeepers that draw on the social, cultural, and political context of their conception (e.g., "ECOMOG babies," "little MINUSTAHS," "blue helmet babies") (Olonisakin and Aning, 1999; Myers et al., 2004; Vahedi et al., 2022). Journalists and researchers have sometimes adopted the expression "peace-babies" to describe children fathered by peacekeepers (e.g., Higate and Henry, 2004; Rudén and Utas, 2009; Simić, 2013). Since this constitutes a euphemistic label that runs the risk of obscuring the potentially violent circumstances of their conception and later developmental needs, we introduce the expression "peacekeeper-fathered children" to provide a more neutral term that minimizes research and presentation bias. The abbreviation "PKFC" is used to refer to all individuals who are fathered by a member of a UNPK force (military, police or civilian) and born to a local mother, irrespective of their age[3] or the circumstances of their conception.

Due to the lack of reliable data and extreme magnitude of underreporting of peacekeeper-perpetrated SEA (Grady, 2016), no scholar to date has attempted to estimate the global population of PKFC. While there is limited systematic research on PKFC, a review of the literature (academic and gray) shows that their existence is not a rarity. From a report by the Geneva Institute for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, an estimated 25,000 PKFC were conceived during the UN's transitional authority in Cambodia, and 6,600 PKFC born in the aftermath of the UN observer mission in Liberia (Bastick et al., 2007). The number of children fathered by peacekeepers during the "ECOMOG Baby Boom" in West Africa has been estimated to range from 25,000 (Cooper, 1998; Grieg, 2001) to 250,000 (Muawuya Zakariah Adam Gombe, 2010; p. 1). Reportedly, in Liberia, sexual relations between peacekeepers and local civilians were so widespread that several NGOs and orphanages were established to cope with the struggles of the abandoned mothers and children (Gaylor, 2001; Rumble and Mehta, 2007). Similar situations were reported from Kosovo where radio advertisements raised awareness regarding the negative consequences of having children with peacekeepers, indicating that the matter was of a significant scale during the Yugoslav wars (Grieg, 2001). In Sierra Leone, mothers of PKFC with foreign fathers are said to have lined the route to the airport when previous contingents left, begging peacekeepers for money to raise their children (Rehn and Sirleaf, 2002). Journalistic and academic research from Haiti and the DRC further demonstrates the high numbers and high needs of PKFC in numerous contexts (Sieff, 2016; McVeigh, 2017; Vahedi et al., 2020; Wagner et al., 2022a).

In line with these mission-specific examples, researchers have suggested that the number of PKFC conceived during individual UN missions is likely between several hundreds to thousands (Simić and O'Brien, 2014; O'Neill, 2019). While the DRC and Haiti missions are among the first that have received sustained attention regarding the births of PKFC, children fathered and deserted by peacekeepers likely exist in many, if not all, countries that have hosted PKOs (Duffy, 2019). This brief review of the literature suggests that (a) PKFC are a significant population of global importance across different geopolitical contexts, (b) PKFC are underreported and under researched; as such, very little is known regarding their life courses. Since both the numbers and realities of the children remain, to a large

2 The Department of Peace Operations, in line with the rest of the UN system and following the principle established by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, considers a child to be any person under the age of 18 regardless of the age of majority in their home state.

3 PKFC represent people at varying periods of life, from infants, to children, adolescents and adults depending on the years of operation the PKO. Hence, the term 'children' does not refer to the natural vulnerabilities of childhood specified in international human rights frameworks but instead describes PKFC as offspring of peacekeepers.

extent, subject of speculation, scholars have voiced the urgency of empirical research that situates PKFC in the literature on war-affected children (Rumble and Mehta, 2007).

Children born of war

Children fathered by peacekeeping forces and born to local mothers are considered part of a global group of children called CBOW (Carpenter, 2007; Mochmann and Larsen, 2008; Mochmann and Lee, 2010). The term CBOW refers to four broad categories of children: (1) children of enemy soldiers, (2) children of occupation forces, (3) children of child soldiers and (4) children of peacekeeping forces (Lee and Glaesmer, 2021). In the mid-1990s, academics and journalists started exploring the life courses of children born of international armed conflict (e.g., children born during the two World Wars, post-war occupations, the Vietnam War and the Balkan War), creating awareness of their situations in different contexts and temporal periods (Bass, 1996; McKelvey, 1999; Grieg, 2001). Recent developments in the field draw attention to the lived experiences of children born of internal conflict, focusing predominantly on children born of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV)[4] including children born to mothers forcibly abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (Apio, 2016; Denov and Cadieux Van Vliet, 2020; Baines and Oliveira, 2021), children born of forced marriage and rape by Boko Haram fighters (Matfess, 2017), and children born as a result of genocidal rape in Rwanda (Banyanga et al., 2017; Denov and Lakor, 2018; Baines and Oliveira, 2021).

Despite growing data around CBOW and the challenges they face, who constitutes and does not constitute a CBOW is an ongoing matter of debate. Furthermore, numerous recognized populations of CBOW remain neglected from academic research (Lee and Glaesmer, 2021). Exemplary of this omission are PKFC, who, despite being considered one of the four main subgroups of CBOW, have been almost entirely unexplored. Thus, there is limited evidence that the social and economic impact of PKFC's heritage resembles that of children fathered by occupation or enemy forces. It has sometimes been argued that including PKFC in the definition of CBOW may be unhelpful in driving policy agendas forward since their context of conception differs in that (a) PKFC may be born of more nuanced and less overtly violent sexual relations than other groups of CBOW (such as those born of genocidal rape), and (b) PKFC are fathered by individuals from a force employed to serve and protect the local population and thus, there may not be the same level of enmity toward them in comparison to occupation contexts (Lee, 2017; Lee and Glaesmer, 2021). Hence, there is some uncertainty as to whether the experiences of PKFC are covered by broader conceptualisations pertaining to CBOW.

4 While CBOW are not limited to children conceived through sexual violence, recent academic and policy attention has largely focused on them. The United Kingdom (UK)'s 2021 'Call to Action' to ensure the rights and wellbeing of children born of CRSV is one such example.

Present paper

PKFC are comparatively understudied and are often excluded from international policy engagement on CBOW. On the basis of fieldwork conducted in Haiti (2017) and the DRC (2018), this article addresses substantial knowledge gaps surrounding their life courses, and for the first time, empirically situates them within the category of CBOW. Since CBOW are defined by vulnerabilities which they do not share with other war-affected populations (Delić et al., 2017), we understand PKFC to comprise CBOW if they share these vulnerabilities. To describe the lived experiences of CBOW along with how PKFC's lived experiences may conform to or deviate from, we have consulted previously reported challenges for CBOW. More specifically, we have synthesized the available multi-disciplinary literature published over the past two decades using the socio-ecological model that was introduced by Lee and Glaesmer (2021). This integrated model was used as a heuristic tool to compare and contrast the vulnerabilities of PKFC and CBOW at the micro, meso, exo, and macro level, offering multi-level insights into how PKFC are situated vis-a-vis CBOW and thus should best be defined and categorized. We will use this model to study the circumstances of PKFC and evidence similarities and differences in their characteristics, addressing broader conceptual questions regarding their place within global regulatory systems and frameworks.

Methods

We draw on case studies from two post-colonial states that have hosted peacekeeping operations, Haiti and the DRC, to analyse to what extent the childhood/adolescence social and economic adversity among PKFC mirrors that experienced by CBOW in other contexts. Peacekeeping personnel in Haiti and the DRC are amongst those most often implicated in misconduct and thus these missions represent key cases with regards to the consequences of SEA. Since UN policy has often been developed in response to waves of allegations, many of which originated from Haiti and the DRC, these cases also represent landmarks for SEA programming. The duration of both missions (Haiti [MINUSTAH] 2004–2017; DRC [MONUC/MONUSCO] 1999–2022), the large size of deployed troops, and the scope of accusations would

suggest that there are a significant number of PKFC in both countries[5].

The research is grounded in field work conducted in partnership with local community-based organizations in Haiti (2017) and eastern DRC (2018) to increase the visibility of SEA victims and their children (Appendix A). Employing a comparative case study design with a predominantly qualitative approach (Gerring, 2004; Thomas, 2021), data were collected using SenseMaker® (Cognitive Edge, no date accessed 2022), a tablet-based software, and in-depth interviews. SenseMaker, a mixed-methods, narrative-capture app, was used by Haitian and Congolese participants to audio record short narratives about interactions between peacekeepers and local women and girls. These short narratives are referred to as micronarratives[6] since they are often brief, only 2–3 minutes in length. SenseMaker then asks participants to interpret the experience shared in the micronarrative by responding to a series of pre-defined interpretation questions. Ten UN bases in Haiti and six UN bases in eastern DRC were chosen and local community members were recruited from within an ∼30 km perimeter of each base. Participants were approached in public spaces such as markets, shops, bus stops, parks and so on. In both Haiti and DRC, a team of local research assistants from partner organizations facilitated the SenseMaker interviews after completing a five-day training. In Haiti, all data were collected in Haitian Kreyòl and in DRC data were collected in the participants' choice of Lingala or Swahili. Using this approach, a convenience sample of 2,541 Haitian and 2,858 Congolese community members shared and interpreted micronarratives about interactions between peacekeepers and local women and girls in areas of UNPK deployments. In collecting a large number of narratives about peacekeeper-civilian relations (positive and negative), the SenseMaker survey gathered perspectives from host community members who witnessed or experienced SEA-related pregnancies. Out of the completed community surveys, one in ten participants in Haiti ($n = 265$) and two out of five participants in the DRC ($n = 1{,}182$) referenced PKFC in the micro-narratives they shared. Female community members who disclosed raising a PKFC in the SenseMaker survey were invited to take part in a qualitative follow-up interview. This approach to sampling enabled the interviewing of mothers/grandmothers of PKFC (Haiti $n = 18$, DRC $n = 60$) who then functioned as gatekeepers to the interviewing of PKFC (DRC $n = 35$[7]).

Shedding light on a previously unexplored phenomenon, the study was explorative and descriptive in nature, designed to provide a first account of the experiences of women raising PKFC who were fathered and abandoned by peacekeepers. Since victims of SEA and children are considered vulnerable groups, interviewing them required circumventing a range of ethical and methodological difficulties. To break down traditional power hierarchies between researcher and participant and reduce the risk of the research inducing negative psychosocial outcomes, information was collected in a participant-oriented manner with open-ended questions that put the participant in control of the information shared (Reinharz and Davidman, 1992; Bell, 2001; Mertus, 2004). In order to include PKFC in the research in an ethical way, we employed age-appropriate interview methods with participatory elements and visual research (see Wagner et al., 2022c). More specifically, a family drawing exercise and photo-elicitation task were used to facilitate a discussion about PKFC's background without explicitly mentioning their heritage or exposing their context of conception. This enabled PKFC to be in control of the information shared and minimized the risk of disclosing previously unknown information. The risk of the study introducing psychological distress, victimization or stigma were further mitigated by collecting de-identified data, interviewing participants in private and keeping the nature and title of the interview open and general (study on peacekeeper-civilian interactions). The authors further set up a referral system for psychosocial and legal support *via* the local partner organisations.

All qualitative interview guides were self-constructed with topic questions and prompts addressing, inter alia, PKFC's place within their families, communities, cultures and political structures. Assuming that many of the fundamental matters around CBOW would serve as a starting point to studying the life courses of PKFC, we consulted existing case studies and theoretically guided assumptions on the life courses of CBOW to identify potential areas of hardship for PKFC and situate them within the broader context of CBOW research. Based on the multi-level adversities faced by CBOW, we investigated whether the experiences of PKFC, as explained by the children themselves and/or their mothers/caregivers, resemble those of CBOW by assessing their identity, relationships, needs and rights.

The interviews were analysed qualitatively, using a mixture of thematic and phenomenological approaches[8]. Triangulating

5 Between 2010 and 2022, the UN misconduct tracking system recorded 38 Haitian victims and 121 Congolese victims who raised paternity claims as a result of SEA (Conduct in UN Field Missions, no date). These numbers are considered under representations because of the barriers victims face in filing complaints, and have been criticised for being subject to significant fluctuations due to changes in policies, reporting, and taxonomies (Simić, 2015; Grady, 2016; Wagner et al., 2022a).

6 A short story in relation to an open-ended prompt.

7 See limitations section for a discussion of why PKFC were not interviewed in Haiti.

8 The present paper includes findings from previously published analyses that discuss specific aspects of PKFC's experiences in Haiti or the DRC. In order to compare PKFC's experiences in both countries and relate them to those of CBOW, this paper offers an overview of their previously identified challenges. Where more information concerning individual findings or their analysis is desired, the reader should refer to the original papers cited throughout.

TABLE 1 Challenges identified for peacekeeper-fathered children vs. other groups of CBOW.

	CBOW literature	PKFC research
Micro-Level	CBOW's lack of knowledge about their background negatively impacts their sense of self and familial relationships.	PKFC, like other CBOW, struggle with the taboo of their ancestry and query their identity due to their fathers' absence and lack of patrilineal family connections.
Meso-Level	Many CBOW experience marginalised social identities and frequent stigmatisation within their families and communities.	Likewise, stigma and discrimination present a common challenge for PKFC that can result in social separation and outsider status relative to families and communities.
Exo-Level	CBOW's experiences vary depending on the socio-cultural context, history and normative framework they are embedded in.	The level of hardship PKFC experience differs based on which traits they possess and how these traits are perceived locally.
Macro-Level	CBOW have legal and political needs that are not adequately enacted by policies.	Like all CBOW, PKFC have a right to recognition, support and full citizenship that is not being realised.

findings with the wider cross-sectional SenseMaker study helped check for inconsistencies and researcher biases during the interpretation and write-up stages.

Results

Through this research, we have identified several aspects of PKFC's heritage that translate into concerns on the micro-individual, meso-social, exo-cultural, and macro-policy level. Table 1 presents an overview of our key findings with regards to how PKFC are situated within the CBOW literature. Below, we will discuss what is known about the experiences of CBOW on each level before describing our results in relation to the literature.

Micro-level: Individual and family

On the micro-level, we explore PKFC's self-concept and sense of familial identity, discussing potential areas of hardship that were informed by the literature. Most CBOW grow up with a conspiracy of silence around their fathers that fuels their need to ascertain their roots throughout their lives (Mitreuter et al., 2019; Provost and Denov, 2020; Vahedi et al., 2020). The secrecy (family denial, lack of official discourse or information) around their origin can raise the feeling that their very existence is wrong or "taboo," a notion that is a root cause for the identity crisis that some CBOW experience (Koegeler-Abdi, 2021). The psychological impact of negative discourses concerning their existence can cause internalised stigma, shame, and anxiety (Mochmann and Lee, 2010; Denov and Lakor, 2017, 2018). Children born of asymmetrical sexual relations like rape might develop an insecure bond with their mothers, for whom their conception is a painful memory (Van Ee and Kleber, 2012; Woolner et al., 2019). In some contexts, dysfunctional relationships with their maternal clans and kinship groups have been found to push CBOW into social isolation, as they long for a sense of self and acceptance (Meckel et al., 2016). A fragmented concept of family can contribute to adverse developmental trajectories and has been found to put CBOW at a higher risk of developing mental health issues, childhood trauma and somatization (Hucklenbroich et al., 2014; Glaesmer et al., 2017). Drawing on these insights, we have investigated whether PKFC's familial relationships are defined by similar feelings of "otherness" and exclusion.

In line with the literature, our analysis reveals that PKFC experience numerous challenges due to their fathers' abandonment and lack of patrilineal family connections, leading them to question fundamental aspects of their identity and belonging. Mothers of PKFC and other primary caregivers (i.e., maternal grandmothers) were often responsible for disclosing sensitive information about biological origins or navigating PKFC's queries about their identity (Vahedi et al., 2020).

> Now I have this child, and he is always questioning me about his father. He would like to know his dad. But unfortunately, I cannot give… I cannot find… I only give him a little explanation as much as he can understand based on his age. And I hope, God willing, if I am still alive when he gets older I will be able to give him more details. Since he cannot understand much as of yet, I can't explain everything, I just told him that his dad was a soldier who came to work around here (Mother, age unknown, Port Salut/Haiti).

PKFC's lack of knowledge about their provenance makes forming a coherent self-concept difficult. The majority of participants reported that PKFC had little to no information about their fathers and received no financial support from them, which held negative implications for their self-esteem and prospects of becoming valued members of society. Unsettled by their incomplete biographies, PKFC engaged in wishful thinking regarding their relationships with their unknown fathers: "I wish I could see him. I wish I could live a good and happy life" (PKFC, 10–15, Bukavu/DRC). Derived from comparisons with peers whose fathers contributed to their wellbeing and who lived in

better financial situations, PKFC saw searching for their fathers as imperative to securing their future (Wagner et al., 2022c). We found that in the DRC, divergence between the learned "ideal of family" and subjective life experience resulted in cognitive tension which was resolved through a situational attribution of neglect. PKFC attributed their fathers' lack of involvement in their lives to circumstances outside of their control (e.g., redeployment). This prevented negative self-attribution and thus, functioned as a defence mechanism for their self-esteem. In assuming that their fathers could not get in touch with them and were hindered in their provision of support, PKFC were able to maintain an identity as "good children" who are worthy of love and attention (Wagner et al., 2022c). This narrative increased the value of searching for fathers and made finding them a major priority.

Due to the peacekeepers' abandonment, mothers of PKFC were often solely responsible for child caring responsibilities and raised their children in settings of extreme socio-economic deprivation. In communities where many lacked essential goods for survival, financial hardship was both a key factor explaining women and girls perceived "desire" to have sexual relations with peacekeepers and a central consequence of peacekeeper fathers' abandonment (Lee and Bartels, 2019; Vahedi et al., 2020).

> About my past, here is what happened. I used to live in a bad situation, in the sense that my parents couldn't take care of me, help me with my needs. That's what led me to have a relationship with a MINUSTAH… I ended up having a baby with him. Once the baby was born, he left me, and hasn't taken care of us. I am the only one doing all I can to take care of the child. I haven't even graduated high school, [because I got pregnant] when I was in "segonde" [equivalent to 10th grade] (Mother, 25-30, Tabarre/Haiti).

Peacekeepers who negated their paternal obligations increased the economic and social vulnerability of mothers, leaving their children to grow up in unfavourable circumstances: "The child is living in these circumstances… which may affect her psychologically, giving her problems later in life. She would like to live well, but I cannot afford to give her that life" (Mother, age unknown, Port Salut/Haiti). Many PKFC hoped that their fathers would return to alleviate their hardship: "I am worried a lot, I am not stable enough to live such a life. Therefore, I often wonder where my father is by saying "father, where are you? Come take me" (PKFC, 10–15, Kisangani/DRC). Absent fathers remained paramount in PKFC's lives and were sometimes depicted as "saviours" who would come to "rescue me [PKFC] from poverty" or "free me [them] from suffering" (PKFC, 10–15, Bukavu/DRC). While the search for peacekeeper fathers was predominantly motivated by PKFC's need for support, being reunited with their fathers was also anticipated to enable improved integration into local communities, and exploration of paternal roots and personal identity. The certainty many PKFC voiced that their fathers were looking for them is illustrated in this comment from an adolescent PKFC in Kisangani: "Who sent you? Maybe you are the one he [father] sent in order to take me. Are you my helper?" Despite an all-consuming desire to locate peacekeepers, the possibilities of contact were minimal, and no PKFC in Haiti or the DRC were actively in touch with their fathers at the time of data collection.

Consequently, PKFC were often brought up by single mothers or close relatives like maternal grandparents or aunts and uncles. Their lack of support from paternal families and clans compounded a sense of illegitimacy and compromised PKFC's chances of sustainable livelihoods. Paternal abandonment also contributed to the feminization of poverty given that their mothers, who reported experiencing adverse socio-economic conditions, were PKFC's primary providers. Although increasingly reliant on their mothers and maternal families, some PKFC received limited care from maternal kin networks, causing them to compare themselves to orphans (Wagner et al., 2022c). Related to their "orphan identity" and lack of material possessions, PKFC expressed an intimate need for care, security, and love: "My father died. My mother is living somewhere else. I am like an orphan… I am suffering here" (PKFC, 10–15, Bukavu/DRC). We found that the circumstances surrounding PKFC's conception complicated maternal attachment and occasionally led to abandonment, rejection, or neglect of the PKFC.

> The first child was brought to me when he was one year and two months old. I took care of him while facing many difficulties. Later, the child's mom came back with a second kid she had made with a South-African. I wondered what to do, to leave the kids or give them to somebody else but I decided that I couldn't throw them away. The case hurt my heart, I felt like someone had to allow them to grow. […] If their father comes back, I will give him the kids without hesitating. I am so sick and tired from supporting them. My daughter, the mother of these children, shows no interest in them. She is wandering here and there after having been spoiled by MONUSCO men. If she had been married legally, maybe she would have been able to assist me. (Grandmother, 40–45, Bukavu/DRC).

Interestingly, Congolese stepfathers occasionally alienated PKFC from the family unit and denied them access to available household resources while Haitian stepfathers were found to be more accepting of the PKFC.

> When my child realised that he wasn't treated fairly or the same as the other children, he stepped forward and wanted me to assure him whether the man with whom I was living was actually his father. I decided to tell him the truth and apologised for all the misfortune and for keeping a child with such a trauma (Mother, 40–45, Bukavu/DRC).

Some Haitian mothers explained that stepfathers viewed their PKFC favourably due to their lighter skin phenotypes. In situations wherein the PKFC is positively perceived by the stepfather, the mother and PKFC may be part of a blended family.

> I found another man, we got together, and he told me that he loves my child and that he looks like a white man from a foreign country, that he really looks like an actor… I have conceived two other children because he thought that I would have such a beautiful child just like the first child I conceived with the MINUSTAH (Mother, age unknown, Tabarre/Haiti).

Meso-level: Community and environmental

On the meso-level, we consider the social status of PKFC to determine whether experiences of stigma and discrimination present a common challenge in their upbringing. Stigma is theorised as a process whereby human differences become socially visible, stereotyped as negative, thereby resulting in the separation of stigmatised persons as outsiders relative to the community and justifying poor treatment that culminates in status loss and discrimination (Link and Phelan, 2001). This process of stigmatisation explains how and why CBOW and PKFC face adversity throughout the life course. Documentation of CBOW across contexts suggests that they often face maltreatment, stigma and discrimination by their communities (Stewart, 2015; Wagner et al., 2020). The marginalisation of CBOW typically originates from preconceptions about their fathers (based on their role as perpetrators or foreign soldiers) or attitudes towards their mothers (based on them engaging in extra-marital sexual relations and having a child out of wedlock) (Apio, 2007; Mukamana and Brysiewicz, 2008). Where their fathers are perceived as aggressors, CBOW might be understood as a symbolic extension of their violent practices as soldiers or perpetrators (Mukangendo, 2007; Liebling et al., 2012; Mukasa, 2017). This can result in them experiencing an inner tension regarding how to position themselves towards their fathers on the one side and their mothers and communities on the other (Weitsman, 2008; Hamel, 2016; Sanchez Parra, 2018). The significant impact of their outsider status is exemplified in Denov and Lakor's (2017) observation that CBOW in Northern Uganda experienced their stigmatised identities in the post-war period as more debilitating than life in captivity during the war. In contexts where their mothers are stigmatised, CBOW might experience a lack of support from their clans and communities, resulting in economic difficulty (Mukamana and Brysiewicz, 2008; Bland, 2019). Drawing on the stigmatising experiences of other groups of CBOW, we look at whether PKFC's background produces equally marginalised social identities.

In line with the literature, our analysis uncovered the often-challenging relationships of PKFC with their communities, showing that their differential treatment within families continued outside the home. PKFC in Haiti and the DRC experienced frequent stereotyping and ostracising by peers, neighbours, and other community members (Wagner et al., 2020; Vahedi et al., 2022). Reasons set out for the perceived stigma and discrimination were multifactorial and most individuals carried a combination of "labels" that made salient the foreign origins of PKFC or their connection to UN peacekeeping (Link and Phelan, 2001). For example, Haitian-born PKFC were labelled as "child of the MINUSTAH," "little MINUSTAH," or more simply "MINUSTAH" (Vahedi et al., 2022). PKFC interviewed in the DRC named fatherlessness, poverty, racial prejudice, as well as their "illegitimate conception" as contributing factors for their stigmatisation. PKFC reported being humiliated or ridiculed on the grounds of not being Congolese, being "white" or "foreign," or otherwise singled out for their ethnic heritage. A large majority reiterated being told to "go to their fathers" or "follow their dads" in order to find relief from familial and socio-economic hardship. Since the inability to uncover paternal roots reduces clan privilege and PKFC's chances of acceptance, comments about fatherlessness were linked to the absence of a male role model and head of household. In both Haiti and the DRC, stigma was manifested in a range of experiences; from teasing and bullying to overt discrimination, abuse, and neglect. These findings support the representation of PKFC as an "out-group" in their community. Severe social stigma exerted influence over PKFC's ability to form meaningful relationships and forced some into isolation and loneliness. In Haiti, some mothers noted that social exclusion may have impacted their child's development and learning abilities (Vahedi et al., 2022):

> "He will never grow up normal at all because wherever he goes he will have the label "here is the child of the MINUSTHA who did not take care of him." … That can impact his learning ability and when the child becomes older that can make it uncomfortable for him to stay in the area." (Mother, 20–25, Hince/Haiti).

In the DRC, PKFC were found to have internalised society's perceptions of them which interfered with healthy self-esteem and identity construction. Internalised stigma, or self-stigma, led some participants to perceive themselves as burdens on their mothers and households to whom the stigma extended (Wagner et al., 2020). In this way, persistent stigma provoked low mood or symptoms of mental health disorders, as the following example shows:

> She [mother] never talks to me in a friendly way. She says I have no value at all for I'm not like her other children. When she says that, I feel like it's better to take a knife, stab myself and die once and for all (PKFC, 10–15, Bunia/DRC)

Social challenges were found to be exacerbated by economic deprivation, a condition that worsened when family support was withdrawn. Thus, the loss of social status and financial insecurity mutually reinforced one another:

> My family's reaction…since they didn't approve of my relationship with the MINUSTAH [officer]. They abandoned me and kicked me out [of the house] to the point where even the community where I live was against me…they were after me….because they were trying to start a war with MINUSTAH. (Mother, 25–30, Taberre/Haiti)

Since in Haiti and the DRC social status is linked to the availability of financial means, mothers were looked down upon for not securing alimony payments from former partners. They reiterated that there was a hierarchy amongst PKFC families with mothers and PKFC who were receiving support at the top and those who did not secure benefits at the bottom.

> Many mock me and laugh at me. Some do because unlike me they were lucky enough to get money, plots of land or houses from their MONUSCO boyfriends. They say I am miserable and cursed for not having been offered such things by my South-African husband. (Mother, 25–30, Bukavu/DRC)

Parallels in the stigma experiences of mothers and children suggested a bidirectional transmission of stigma between generations that negatively affected the mother-child relationship and caused feelings of guilt and shame among PKFC. This is reflected in insults directed towards PKFC like "daughter/son of a bitch," "bastard" or "illegitimate," which portray the children as the products of rape, sex-work, or a parental relationship that otherwise conflicted with social norms. The socio-economic burden of raising a child without a male partner, and raising a PKFC in particular, rendered some Congolese mothers unmarriable and lowered their social status in the eyes of the community.

> When people learn that you were once friends with a guy from MONUSCO they start despising you and saying ill of you. It is not easy to find another boy or man friend if you have been deceived by one of them. So many people told me to abort so I wouldn't be called the mother of a MONUSCO child. They said I would never find another one to love me if I kept the pregnancy (Mother, 35–40, Kalemi/DRC).

Similarly, in Haiti, mothers and PKFC also experienced reduced social status, exemplified by public humiliation from community members due to the mothers' perceived promiscuity: "But you know [noisy] neighbours, they would say that "this girl is promiscuous, she had a child with the white men, she slept with the white men" (Mother, age unknown, Tabarre/Haiti). Some women found themselves in a downward spiral of further social rejection when extreme poverty led them to (re)engage in sex-work to meet their child's basic needs. While children occasionally understood their stigma to reside in their conception and their mother's social circumstances, mothers reported that the societal treatment of their children was aggravating to their own social standing. In several cases, these dynamics had a bearing on the mother-child relationship and adversely affected the bond between PKFC and their mothers.

Exo-level: society and culture

On the exo-level, we explore the socio-cultural dynamics in which PKFC's experiences are embedded. The literature on CBOW shows that cultural and religious beliefs can cause children born of atypical sexual relations to be marginalised if their resulting identity is non-conforming with dominant views on class, race, and kinship. In many post-conflict environments, the mere existence of CBOW contradicts the normative framework of the communities they are born into since having a child out of wedlock or fraternising with the enemy is seen as illegitimate or traitorous (Mochmann and Larsen, 2008; Satjukow, 2011; Kiconco, 2022). In patrilineal and patriarchal societies where the father's identity is the building block of belonging and status, their unknown paternal origin has been found to leave CBOW with an impaired sense of place in society, making them feel like they do not belong to the culture they grow up (Apio, 2016; Sanchez Parra, 2018). In postcolonial states, the biracial background of CBOW may be linked to oppression, especially if their fathers' involvement in the conflict is seen as part of a neo-colonial project (Razack, 2000; Higate and Henry, 2004; Henry, 2013). Drawing on CBOW's experiences of social exclusion, we establish whether PKFC's societal perception is dependent on how their identity relates to the history of conflict and inequality in the areas where they live. As part of this assessment, we look at whether critical deviance in structural categories and identity-forming traits between PKFC affects how they are situated in socio-cultural and historical narratives.

Expanding on findings in the literature, our analysis revealed differences in the societal perception of PKFC that seem to arise from variance in their presumed affiliation with UN forces. Occasionally, community members projected prejudice against peacekeepers onto the children by portraying them as conceited, privileged, or violent; personality traits that were linked to the perceived role of peacekeepers in the local conflicts. While most PKFC were severely marginalised, heavy stigmatisation did not affect all; some PKFC were granted opportunities and respect due to their heritage. We examined the relevant mechanisms behind social status to explain what caused this societal perception. In the DRC, participants' varying references to race suggested status differences for PKFC based on their fathers'

ethnic origin and troop contributing country (Wagner et al., 2022b). PKFC whose fathers were from central African countries were less often confronted with stereotyping and prejudice because their group membership as PKFC was less salient, and they assimilated more easily into the local culture. Physical features that evidently identified PKFC with their fathers' lineage made them an easier target for racial stigmatisation and conveyed more potential for societal rejection.

> He is a child just like others, but the others still tease him saying he's a white South-African but walking around like a poor local child. They call him a south-African son, a boy with an unknown father (Mother, 35–40, Bukavu/DRC).

Our research shows that community members in host states had a distinct understanding of "whiteness" that predicted bi-racial youth—who were often defaulted to the "white" category—to possess different behavioural characteristics than black children. Those with foreign looks were expected to abide by societal norms associated with their social group membership that seemed to originate from the historical legacy of colonialism and stereotypical assumptions of the white elite. Families and communities placed social role expectations upon bi-racial PKFC that resembled race-based social hierarchies.

> She behaves like white people. Whenever I buy something for her siblings, she wants to have it. I often meet with other women who are in the same situation. Whenever we meet, we cry together because we think about how hard it is to raise that kind of children. White children and black children are very different; the white one wants to sleep well, eat well and live in a given comfort. That lifestyle is difficult to provide. (Mother, age unknown, Bunia/DRC).

While most assumptions had negative connotations, it was also voiced that having a "beautiful, mixed-race children" could improve one's circumstances (Community member, age unknown, Saint Marc/Haiti), lead to financial benefits or even "salvation," as a mother in Bukavu described: "The child indeed is white, so he might be my salvation one day… Many people like him and give him 5 dollars or 10, especially when we walk around the airport. People are happy to call him a white boy." In line with that, some PKFC were proud of their skin colour and conceptualised their "whiteness" to be a marker of difference vis-a-vis their community that they wanted to reinforce by seeking out contact points with their father's culture:

> She knows that her dad is not Haitian, and she always says [that] she herself is not Haitian or she's "white"—you know her language skills are not fully developed to say that she is not Haitian, but she says she's not Haiti. She says her dad's name is [x], here is where he lives. That means in her mind, she always thinks she is not Haitian (Mother, 25–30, Port Salut/Haiti).

Our findings highlighted that achieving "white" privilege (being bi-racial, "white" presenting and relatively wealthy) led to an elevated social status while failing to achieve "white" privilege (being bi-racial, "white" presenting, and poor) led to stronger social stigmatisation. In Haiti, community members perceived mothers as "willful" agents who "desired" to conceive children with MINUSTAH peacekeepers for the purpose of upward social mobility (through alimony, remittances, opportunities for emigration, employment prospects, or marriage, etc); an attitude which may be reflective of Haiti's legacy of French colonialism and colourism following the Haitian revolution (Dupuy, 2014; Hossein, 2015; Marius, 2022). However, in the case of single motherhood due to the peacekeeper's abandonment, upward social mobility did not occur and thus both the mother and child experienced social stigma:

> "People in the neighbourhood, the neighbours, they gossip… They sometimes talk, and say well, I went and made a white man get me pregnant and so and so [as if she did that on purpose … Some people talk and say, well, you went and got pregnant by a MINUSTAH (soldier) and, you are going to be eating shit with this child…I suffer a lot of setbacks with the child. They sometimes humiliate me, (and say) a lot of other things that I can't repeat. I suffer humiliation, deception (fighting back tears) from people." (Mother, age unknown, Port Salut/Haiti)].

If PKFC's anticipated living standard contrasted with reality, they became a target for societal rejection (see "white-poverty stigma" in Wagner et al., 2022b). Hence, physical features that clearly identified PKFC as "foreign" amplified status differences with respect to participants' socioeconomic status. This shows that stigmatisation for PKFC does not occur universally but is mediated by different factors that increase participants' vulnerability to exclusion, such as minority racial identification and financial hardship. Based on our analysis, bi-racial background accentuated PKFC's socio-economic status and created within-group differences among PKFC. Overall, our findings on the exo-level demonstrate the role of context in shaping PKFC's social identities. In highlighting PKFC's status differences, we demonstrate that the societal perception of children is dependent on geopolitical, cultural, and historical influences. While some of their traits were more salient in Haiti or the DRC, there were similarities in their societal perception that seemed to originate from the countries shared postcolonial history. For example, social constructions of "whiteness" informed by white supremacy and colourism can influence the social status and wellbeing of PKFC who experience considerable economic disadvantage.

The prevalence of SEA and PKFC in both Haiti and the DRC has diminished the perceived legitimacy of the peacekeeping missions (Kovatch, 2016; Vahedi et al., 2021). Community derived Sensemaker data from the DRC shows a general distrust of MONUSCO peacekeepers, with wellknown instances of SEA

and abandoned children provided as evidence that peacekeepers are not serious about fulfilling their mandate, increasing rather than decreasing insecurity:

> "Monusco doesn't care with conflicts, its concern is its presence in the country where it's easy to loot and plunder minerals in most conflict areas[…] Some children that they abandoned have no chance to know their birth fathers[…] Sexual abuse was recurrent at Monusco. Many local girls became pregnant, had children after dating with Monusco agents, simply because they met with them when they needed water. So Monusco made the Democratic Republic of Congo become a Republic of disorders and conflicts." (Male, 35–44, Kalemie/DRC).

CBOW have been accused of decreasing social cohesion and putting communities at risk (Tasker et al., 2020). The same charges were not directly shared by PKFC in this research, but it is possible that association with an increasingly unpopular peacekeeping mission may further reduce the social status of PKFC beyond the stigma they already experience.

Analysis uncovered a further breakdown in trust between mothers and the peacekeeping mission when reports were not properly followed-up on or supports forthcoming:

> "I reported this problem to his officials, and they promised that they would relay this information to whom it might concern. They listened to us, and seemed to sympathize with us… All the ladies who had children with their employees were requested to meet quite often in order to collect our pleas… However, whenever we showed up for the meeting, it was always put off again until we got discouraged and dropped it." (Mother, 25–30, Bukavu/DRC).

This decrease in institutional trust may reduce the likelihood that women report future offenses and undermines the status of the mission. In this way, we see the impact of PKFC and the lack of support provisioning as extending the social impacts of PKFC beyond individuals and families and into the larger community, to the detriment of peacekeeping missions and the United Nations more broadly.

Macro-level: Policy and rights

On the macro-level, we consider broader political structures, and conceptual questions regarding how PKFC's rights are applied in international legal frameworks and support programmes, determining their political needs and the effectiveness of current policies to enforce their rights. The literature on CBOW shows that environmental influences—expressed through economic hierarchies, political structures, and bilateral relations between the father's and mother's home states—often marginalise CBOW and manifest themselves in laws that intentionally or unintentionally cause material and educational inequities for them, either through explicit discrimination or through their omission. Prior research demonstrates that CBOW across contexts experience social, economic, and political exclusion and barriers to effective participation (Daniel-Wrabetz, 2007; Mochmann and Lee, 2010; Stewart, 2017). In addition to the insecurity that all children in conflict face, CBOW might be exposed to additional rights violations, such as their right to education, family, identity, nationality, physical security, protection from stigma and even survival (UN General Assembly, 1989; Carpenter, 2007; Delić et al., 2017). Related to the status of their economically insecure mothers, CBOW might be deprived of food and other essential goods such as clothing and adequate shelter (Carpenter, 2007; Stewart, 2017). Their often-ambiguous legal status may prevent them from accessing social services, personal data and national identity documents (Akello, 2013; Gill, 2019). Local and international actors may contest their citizenship or deny them access to records about their parents, should such records even exist (Carpenter, 2007). Challenges in birth registration due to discriminatory citizenship laws have been documented in numerous contexts including Uganda, Rwanda, Liberia, and the DRC (Neenan, 2018; Denov and Kahn, 2019; Tasker et al., 2020). These rights violations might become increasingly visible as CBOW enter adolescence and struggle with their lack of access to resources and opportunities. Drawing on these insights, we investigate how PKFC's marginalisation individually and in their communities interact with political ideologies that cause inequities for CBOW globally.

In line with the literature, we found that PKFC grapple with political visibility, (inter)national legislation and rights enforcement, and face barriers to accessing the care and support they require and are legally entitled to. Of the mothers interviewed, most described their PKFC's limited access to food, shelter, healthcare, or other essential goods, a theme that was often referred to as "suffering": "I don't have the means; she needs to go to school, she needs to eat. You need to buy her clothes, and you don't have the means to do that.… the MINUSTAH [soldier] didn't find me with children—he came in, gave me a child, left me all alone with that child (Mother, 25–30, Port Salut/Haiti). The interviews demonstrated that UN support programmes for victims of SEA did not reach burdened families (Vahedi et al., 2022; Wagner et al., 2022a). In Haiti and the DRC, most participants received no assistance from the UN or peacekeeper fathers. Without that support, many mothers found it impossible to adequately cater to the welfare of PKFC. Community members expressed disappointment in MINUSTAH/MONUSCO and the UN's lack of accountability with respect to the abandoned PKFC, mentioning "MINUSTAH does not value these children" and that "it's as if no one is there to support these children" (Community member, male, 18–24 years old, St Marc, Haiti). As a result, the majority of PKFC

were resource deprived, unable to pursue their education, and in desperate need of safeguarding.

> About me? Let me tell you that I never go to school. I have no good clothes… When I think of the deep poverty, I'm in, I feel much despair. I'm dressed poorly. I have no body lotion, not even the local palm oil or soap to wash my face. I have no food. My life is non-sense. Hard life conditions. It's too harsh, too bad actually. Nothing changes for the good ever. My family goes through much pain to find the amount of food we need daily. Sometimes, when we get about 1,000 Congolese Francs [0.5 USD], we thank God for it, but we never get full or satiated with the little food we have. On many occasions, we go to bed without having eaten anything. I have no shoes, not flip-flops either. You can see that what I am wearing is completely torn apart (PKFC, 10–15, Bukavu/DRC).

Similar sentiments were shared in Haiti, wherein mothers wondered what the future of their PKFC would hold in the absence of support: "If we receive no help to raise them, they could become hooligans hurting the community" (Mother, 20–25, Tabarre/Haiti). Many participants who were aware of the existence of PKFC spoke of their unmet material needs and the implication poverty would have on their life courses.

> It is not a good idea for the white man to have a child and leave him behind… that not only puts the mother in trouble, but the child is also in trouble. I can say that this child is now hopeless… I live in Port-Salut and I can tell you that I myself know at least six kids that are living under these conditions. They were fathered by these people and then they left, but the kids are here going through hardships. (Male community member, 35–44, Port Salut/Haiti).

This illustrates that PKFC whose needs are presumed to be closely connected to those of their mothers have vulnerabilities of their own. Many experienced a violation of their right to education, equal opportunity, self-actualisation, non-discrimination, and a standard of living that properly supports their development. PKFC whose fathers' identities are unknown were unlikely to be legally recognized within their state. In the context of eastern DRC, this may restrict their chances to social security, economic rights and civic participation, cause problems with access to healthcare and social services, and increase child protection risks (e.g., child labour, child marriage, trafficking, exploitation, and conscription into the armed forces) (The Fund for Global Human Rights, 2017). While there was a consensus that PKFC needed support, SenseMaker narratives from the DRC revealed some ambivalence in community members' perceptions of mothers of PKFC. While most community members expressed empathy toward the mother and anger at the MONUSCO, some participants demonstrated a belief that women who have sex with foreign peacekeepers should be grateful for any support they receive:

> He pays the rent for her; he provides her with everything she needs, worthy things, but later, she offended him, attributed the pregnancy to him and charged him with $5,000 USD. Do you think he left his country and his family to DR Congo in order to help Congolese? He might have in his country his wife and children. You should be grateful to him for his modest financial support (Female community member, 35–44, Goma/DRC).

Participants mentioned the difficulties in trying to secure support legally given the fathers are not Haitian/Congolese and had returned to their country of origin. While most mothers expressed little engagement with UN policy on SEA and systematic child support, those who did considered UN pathways for assistance abstract measures with no positive impact on the structural inequalities they were facing and pointed out that obstacles in UN protocols (e.g., corruption, gap in legal authority) prevented them from securing financial support or other benefits for their children through official channels (Wagner et al., 2022a).

Discussion

In this paper, we have consulted the existing body of work on CBOW to compare and contrast the life courses of PKFC. Drawing on the perspectives of PKFC, their mothers/grandmothers and community members in PKO-host communities in DRC and Haiti, we have tested the theoretical assumption that PKFC's challenges mirror those described in the CBOW literature. To understand whether PKFC's adversities parallel those of children fathered by occupation, enemy forces or child soldiers, we have applied a socio-ecological model that—informed by prior research on those groups—assessed the children's positions within their families, communities, societal and political structures. By presenting the first empirical evaluation of PKFC's assigned group membership as CBOW, we have integrated two previously separate streams of literature (on CBOW and UNPK/SEA).

To ascertain if PKFC share the challenges of CBOW on the micro-level, our research explored whether PKFC's identity is impacted by a lack of knowledge about their fathers, fewer attachment figures and meaningful relationships. Research with CBOW in various contexts has shown that learning about their conception plays an important role for the identity formation and development of CBOW (Glaesmer et al., 2012; Mitreuter et al., 2019). Our findings show that PKFC, like other CBOW, are often faced with silence about their fathers and struggle with the taboo of their ancestry. The missing

knowledge about their heritage affects their sense of self and leaves them with an impaired feeling of belonging and purpose. Previous research has found that missing information about their past can push CBOW to fill in the gaps in their biographies by making up stories about their parents; a practice that encourages the demonisation or idealisation of absent fathers (Lee, 2017). Reproducing this, we found that PKFC from the DRC assumed that their fathers wanted to care for them but were hindered in fulfilling parental responsibilities; a form of idealisation that was supported by peacekeepers being part of a benevolent force employed to offer help and assistance. PKFC who attribute their abandonment to circumstances outside of their fathers' control were more ready to forgive their fathers for their absence. In consequence, they may have less tension-filled relationships with them than children fathered by enemy or occupation soldiers. Considering a circumstantial attribution of neglect as a mechanism to preserve self-esteem and hope might help explain children's urge to find absent fathers in other settings (Wagner et al., 2022c). It appears that for PKFC in the DRC (where paternal orphans struggle with the financial implication of limited paternal care), wishful thinking becomes a way of coping with adversity and almost takes a religious place in the children's outlook on life. Our research shows that PKFC families' determination to search for absent fathers is an attempt to improve their financial circumstances. This suggests that the desire of PKFC to reunite with absent fathers may be particularly strong for those who grow up in contexts of extreme poverty (Wagner et al., 2022c).

Following prior research, our findings show that disruptions in family patterns, increased levels of poverty and the breakdown of community structures during conflict, political instability, and natural disasters inform women's/girls' vulnerability to conceiving PKFC. In line with case studies on post-WWII-Germany and the Bosnian War of the 1990s that delineate the complex intergenerational consequences of sexual violence (Roupetz et al., 2021), our research shows that the psychological burden of mothers that results from giving birth to a child through volatile social and environmental circumstances impacts parenting attitudes and acceptance of the CBOW by their clan and kinship groups. As a result of their perceived illegitimate conception and unconventional family life, some mothers and PKFC face prejudice and rejection from maternal families. PKFC in our study were occasionally raised by grandmothers or close relatives rather than biological mothers which may reflect the lack of maternal attachment documented for other CBOW. While some PKFC in the DRC reported that their mothers' attitudes towards them were characterised by ambivalence or neglect, others reflected on a sense of solidarity, emotional availability, and closeness to their mothers. Supporting pre-existing literature, we conclude that many of the family and identity-related challenges PKFC experience resemble those of CBOW in other geopolitical and historical contexts (Carpenter, 2007; Baines and Oliveira, 2021).

To ascertain if PKFC share the challenges of CBOW on the meso-level, our research explored whether PKFC's identity is impacted by frequent stereotyping and marginalised social identities. Stigma in the context of CBOW refers to individuals being labelled as deviant for possessing traits that clash with locally accepted values or for lacking a recognised identity (Bergmans, 2017). Our research demonstrates that PKFC, like CBOW, are at an increased risk of marginalisation at the hands of families and communities. Since their parentage sets them apart from the rest of the societies within which they are raised, PKFC experience neglect, abuse, abandonment, violence, and a general lack of protection. The sources of their stigmatisation (being conceived in a union that is not sanctioned or legitimised by local customs, growing up without their fathers, being visibly interethnic and disproportionately poor) represent common challenges in the upbringing of many CBOW (Kiconco, 2015; Tasker et al., 2020). Based on previous research, certain attitudes, and experiences PKFC encountered were expected to vary based on the context of the host country and the positionality of peacekeepers. For instance, it has previously been hypothesized that PKFC's background might less readily lead to societal rejection, given that the reputation of peacekeepers is not inherently negative (Lee, 2017). We found that although, in theory, peacekeepers represent a neutral force that is deployed to serve and protect the local population, they were largely perceived as occupiers or colonial powers. These perceptions may be particularly relevant to PKO deployed to post-colonial settings with a longstanding history of foreign intervention. Further, in the DRC, community members expressed anger at peacekeepers' perceived corruption, inability or unwillingness to end conflicts, and for increasing rather than decreasing insecurity (Bartels et al., 2021). In Haiti, peacekeepers were associated with the outbreak of cholera and with the exploitation and abuse of children (Lee and Bartels, 2019; King et al., 2020; Fraulin et al., 2021; Bartels et al., 2022). Hence, PKFC did not escape the difficulties that other CBOW face for their connection to outside intervenors accused of committing wrongdoing. On the contrary, mothers described the damage to their reputation to be particularly severe due to their association with the UN and the peacekeeper fathers' abandonment; thus, cultural expectations and family code seemed to oppose relationships with UNPK staff in similar ways that are reported by other groups of CBOW regarding reservations against their fathers. We conclude that based on their father's involvement in UNPK, PKFC are rarely met with a more tolerant attitude by their communities than other CBOW.

Relatedly, it has sometimes been predicted that PKFC may face less risk of abuse and neglect than other CBOW, since their fathers are less readily condemned as perpetrators of overt violence (Lee, 2017). However, in both Haiti and the DRC, peacekeepers were perceived as perpetrators of additional

insecurity for women and children when they conceived children and subsequently abandoned them. It is important here to emphasise the context women were living in. As discussed in the results, almost all women interviewed in this research were living in poverty, with limited social mobility and few formal supports. Some had been displaced and all lived through ongoing conflict-related stressors. It is not necessary to position all encounters described in the interviews as directly violent to critically consider how strategic agency may be enacted to increase women's ability to survive. This does not negate the exploitative circumstances in which these encounters occur, instead calling for a consideration of violence and exploitation as nuanced, and simultaneously interpersonal and structural (Baines, 2015; Bunting et al., 2021; Stallone, 2021). Our findings suggest that the UN classification of SEA does not serve to determine differences in the experiences of PKFC who appear to suffer adversity irrespective of the nature of their parents' sexual relations. Instead of being a clear function of their mother's coercion, PKFC's challenges appeared to be mediated by other factors. For example, we found that many of PKFC's difficulties were compounded by poverty, therefore, PKFC were found to face more severe challenges if their mother's vulnerability to SEA was related to poverty. Confirming the experiences of CBOW in the literature, we conclude that experiences of stigma and discrimination present a common challenge in the upbringing of PKFC.

To ascertain if PKFC share the challenges of CBOW on the exo-level, our research explored whether PKFC's circumstances challenge the social norms, attitudes, and ideologies in post-conflict societies and whether differences in their identity-forming characteristics lead to a varying degree of cultural discrimination. We found that the "rules" attached to post-colonial societies excluded PKFC with foreign status and lack of resources from opportunities that are traditionally afforded to children. In line with previous research conducted in Germany and Austria that showed CBOW to have different experiences depending on which nationality their father represented during the occupation (Stelzl-Marx and Satjukow, 2015), our research reflects on PKFC as a racially heterogeneous group. The diversity of troop contributing countries and the differences in the social construction of "whiteness" within host countries means that PKFC have a range of physical phenotypes that translate to diverging experiences of stigmatisation and privilege. In Haiti and the DRC, PKFC with lighter skin phenotypes were perceived as having a dominant racial identity that historically constituted a privileged social status. Due to their economic deprivation, PKFC non-etheless belonged to a lower social class, resulting in a conflicting social role. We found an expectation for PKFC who were white presenting to have a higher living standard, a narrative that might be shaped by peacekeepers being in control of desirable resources. In focusing on identity-forming characteristics that contribute to a more or less privileged social identity, our analysis shows the value in deconstructing binaries of universal suffering for CBOW and analyse the variability within and between subgroups. While PKFC's experiences on the exo-level are comparable to those of CBOW in other contexts, we have shown that socio-cultural context determines individual trajectories based on how CBOW's identity-forming characteristics are perceived locally.

In situating PKFC's circumstances within the political structures that marginalise CBOW in other settings, we have addressed their challenges on the macro-level. We found that lack of political recognition both domestically and internationally has frustrated PKFC's ability to fully participate in their communities and have their rights secured. Challenges with birth registration limit children's ability to enrol in school, hold certain jobs, attend university, or participate fully in political life. The problem applies equally to PKFC as other CBOW and, indeed, in contexts such as Liberia that require the child to be born in the country to a father of the same nationality in order for children to be registered as full citizens (UNHCR, no date, "Stateless in Liberia"), many CBOW are excluded.

Challenges in obtaining child support payments from the peacekeeper fathers violate the rights of PKFC, as guaranteed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Children have a right to proper "maintenance" from their parents as outlined in Article 18 of the CRC, which further states that both parents have an equal obligation to the child. In instances where the child's parents are unable to provide a standard of living that properly supports their development, Article 27 requires state parties to provide for the child's care. As discussed in earlier sections of this paper, mothers of PKFC often struggle with economic hardship and deep poverty, receiving little to no support from either the child's father or the state. This is true of many CBOW. The CRC is the most widely ratified convention in UN history, and yet few states have effectively provided for CBOW, including PKFC. PKFC are in a unique position when compared to other CBOW in that their fathers are more easily identifiable and registered members of a national military, police force, or civilian deployment. Whether the experiences of PKFC in accessing support resemble those of other groups of CBOW depends in large part on whether they were fathered by a soldier, a fact that determines their recourse to justice and alimony. PKFC who are fathered by civilian staff can resort to civilian legislation to make paternity claims while PKFC fathered by uniformed staff need to go through the respective military channels and work around the immunity militaries are typically afforded (Freedman, 2018; Ferstman, 2020; Lee and Glaesmer, 2021). The logistical challenges are many, and the cost and effort of pursuing these claims are often prohibitive. Supporting findings from the literature, we have demonstrated that PKFC like other CBOW have needs for recognition, support and full citizenship that are currently not being realised.

Policy considerations

Academic writing on SEA and policy reporting has often considered PKFC an extension of their mother's victimisation and thus, discourse regarding their rights is normally embedded in discussions about UN programming, e.g., the UN assistance protocol for victims of SEA specifies that with regards to "children born of SEA," assistance aims to "enable the guardian/caretaker to address their children's relevant medical, psychosocial, legal and material needs" (ECHA/ECPS UN and NGO Task Force on Protection from SEA, 2009; p. 8). Given the inefficient support structures for victims demonstrated in this research, addressing PKFC's right to support in SEA policies needs to be seen critically. For PKFC to no longer be secondary considerations in the framings of humanitarian and international law, reporting and research need to treat them as independent subjects about whom there is a need of a deeper understanding. Based on the high rates of unaddressed needs present in this research, we argue that PKFC deserve to be a category of their own in institutional discourse so that they can find representation in policy and practice. Refocusing discussions about PKFC away from SEA and towards CBOW may foster policy changes that advocate for their rights and create a more comprehensive and sustainable solution to their adversities. This paper shows that the existence of PKFC cross-culturally has public health, psychosocial, economic, and politico-legal implications that resemble those of CBOW. Given their similarities on the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-level, PKFC should be considered CBOW—a global population of vulnerable children that is recognized in international politics and deserves specific treatment and attention.

The legal scaffolding to better support all CBOW, including PKFC, is in place through the CRC as well as regional instruments enshrining children's[9] rights, such as the Organization of African Unity's African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. With resolution 2,467, the UN Security Council recognised CBOW as war-affected populations (UN Security Council, 2019). Further attention to the unmet needs of CBOW and their mothers was galvanized through the UN General Assembly, 2022 report "Women and girls who become pregnant as a result of sexual violence in conflict and children born of sexual violence in conflict." However, the UNSG specifically distinguishes PKFC from children born of CRSV[10] in this report. Considerations of PKFC are limited in these documents and it is unclear on what basis the UNSG decided to differentiate between these groups of vulnerable young people who face similar challenges. Many of the challenges and difficulties the UNSG describes, including lack of access to education, community stigma, maternal trauma, limited citizenship rights, equally apply to PKFC, as demonstrated herein. A key distinction between CBOW and PKFC, from the UNSG report, is in differentiating SEA from CRSV. However, the Deschamps et al., 2015 report wellestablished this is a false distinction, highlighting the high numbers of rapes, including gang rapes, and child sexual abuse perpetrated by peacekeepers in the Central African Republic. UNICEF argues that it is unhelpful to divide vulnerable young people into distinct categories and that this often increases rather than decreases stigma (Michels and Sematumba, no date accessed 2020). While the circumstances of their conception vary and are not always explicitly violent, our research shows that the experiences of PKFC and other CBOW are similar enough to warrant their inclusion in CBOW to better have their needs met and rights enacted.

We recommend three concrete areas for policy developments and reform that will better support PKFC as a category of CBOW: Paternity testing and child support payments should be required at the T/PCC level with UN backing and support, the UN should advocate for more inclusive citizenship laws, and legal accountability and a rights-based approach must be fully implemented and expanded at the community and international level.

Increased political will at the UN and within T/PCCs is needed to ensure that children are duly supported by their fathers. The UN has no obligation or authority to directly compensate mothers of PKFC or order child support payments (Wagner et al., 2022a). It can, however, provide interim assistance and play an increased role in encouraging Member States, who exercise jurisdiction over child support claims, to increase child support accessibility to mothers. Given the high and unmet needs of PKFC demonstrated, our research impresses upon implicated parties the legal obligation to facilitate child support claims. The UN has increasingly employed a "name and shame" approach to SEA, with the country of origin of alleged perpetrators published and openly accessible. A similar approach should be taken in regard to child support claims wherein women and children who have been unsupported by the men they claim to have fathered their children are assisted in filing complaints that feed into a central database.

9 While CBOW and PKFC as categories may refer to people at any life stage, we argue that protections and securement of their rights should be enacted as soon as they are born and are especially crucial during early development. We therefore draw largely on children's rights in this section, rather than human rights more broadly.

10 Given the joint emphasis on children born of sexual violence in international political and academic fora, we primarily consider violent contexts of conception in our discussions of CBOW. The reason for this is two-fold: firstly, by positioning PKFC in relation to CBOCRSV we are better able to compare the contexts of violence and exploitation that PKFC were conceived through and continue to live in. Secondly, we avoid the possible rebuttal that would position PKFC as CBOW but differentiate them from CBOCRSV, the group best positioned to receive enhanced supports and resources.

We have established that PKFC are rarely recognized and supported by their biological fathers. PKFC and other CBOW are further disenfranchised through discriminatory citizenship laws that prevent or seriously complicate their birth registrations. In the DRC, for example, both parents' names must be listed for a child to be legally registered (Global Human Rights, 2017); this is obviously not possible in many cases of rape or sexual abuse, especially when perpetrated by armed actors. In Liberia, children born outside the country to non-Liberian fathers must endure a lengthy and expensive process to become citizens; this was an important issue for Liberian CBOW in refugee camps (Tasker et al., 2020). Difficulties or barriers to birth registration can have serious impacts on CBOW's political participation, access to higher education, employment, and international travel. It further sets CBOW apart from their communities and peers, sometimes aggravating feelings of isolation and ostracism (Tasker et al., 2020). While birth registration and citizenship laws are the purview of each country, the UN can and should support PKFC and other CBOW to obtain birth certificates and full citizenship wherever possible and advocate for repeal of discriminatory laws. This is also an opportunity for bilateral advocacy from countries aiming to uphold feminist values in their foreign policy, such as Canada.

If the UN and member states better recognize and enact their ethical obligation to support PKFC through a justice-oriented approach, the same could be extended to all CBOW. Hence, PKFC could be central to advancing political agendas for CBOW. As established, needs are common, and there may be limited value in distinguishing between sub-categories. Progressive policy and programmatic developments could ensure that all CBOW are better supported, advocacy around inclusive citizenship will benefit all CBOW, and stronger legal mechanisms to ensure rights are not violated would improve the life course of all young people born of war.

Limitations

Despite drawing from large qualitative samples, participants were selected purposely, and the research is not representative of PKFC and their mothers in Haiti/DRC or elsewhere. Since the presented analyses are culturally sensitive, the findings are further limited in their generalisability. However, host countries of PKOs are often structurally similar with regards to socio-economic challenges, political fragility, and gender norms and thus the results are expected to make valuable contributions to other peacekeeping settings. The paper requires some additional methodological comments. First, due to the sensitive nature of the research and different groups being accommodated in different countries at different times, unique survey instruments had to be developed which resulted in occasional missing data. Some of the differences in participants' experiences may be due to who was included in the interviews and what they were comfortable sharing with the research team[11]. Moreover, it is important to note that only Congolese PKFC were interviewed due to the necessary research infrastructure (psychological support and child-appropriate interviewing) not being set up in Haiti. Second, the evidenced similarities/differences in the experiences of PKFC and other CBOW are based on cross-sectional qualitative analysis, not statistical inferences or longitudinal research. Future studies should consider conducting systematic comparisons between different groups of CBOW to determine a more powerful conclusion and causation between the children's circumstances of conception and later challenges in life. Third, the analysis was conducted by a group of female Global-North based academics with inherent bias regarding the discussed cultural norms. Although local experts, researchers and translators were consulted along the way, nuances of participants' narratives might not always have been appreciated fully.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have shown that PKFC are CBOW who are connected to conflict in a unique way. Although the UN has a direct obligation to support PKFC, it currently excludes them from consideration as or alongside CBOW and PKFC's needs are not being properly met. This has a significant impact on the lives of PKFC who often grow up in extremely difficult situations, fighting exclusion at multiple interacting levels. Given that reparations for PKFC currently do not exist, specific measures are needed to transform their life courses. If the UN makes progress in conceptualising programming for PKFC, this may become a blueprint for CBOW support in other contexts. The outlined policy considerations have laid the foundation for action that addresses their challenges and helps to achieve sustainable change for CBOW globally.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Ethics Committee of the University of Birmingham (protocol ERN_16-0950; ERN_18-0083; ERN_17-1715), Queen's University Health Sciences and Affiliated Teaching Hospitals Research Ethics Board

11 Gender socialisation and local cultural norms might determine that victims of SEA in Haiti/DRC are more hesitant and less used to talking publicly or sharing personal experiences surrounding culturally sensitive topics like sexual violence and abortion.

(protocol 6020398; 6019042), and the Congolese National Committee of Health Ethics (CNES001/DP-SK/119PM/2018). Written informed consent from the participants' legal guardian/next of kin was not required to participate in this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Author contributions

SL was the lead investigator of the Haiti study. SB the principal investigator of the DRC study. KW conceptualised the paper and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. HT and LV contributed sections to the subsequent drafts of the manuscript. All authors were involved in the conception, implementation, data collection, analysis of the research, read, edited, and approved the final manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

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Appendix A

Community partner roles and contributions

Community partner	Role/contribution
Commission of Women Victims for Victims (KOFAVIV)	Haitian grassroots association that works to combat gender-based violence and reduce feminised poverty. Their work has focused on sexual abuse by military and paramilitary groups, and they were instrumental in informing the research questions, facilitating access and data collection and advising on cultural and ethical considerations.
Bureau des Avocats Internationaux (BAI)	Based in Port-au-Prince Haiti, BAI has helped victims prosecute human rights cases, has trained Haitian lawyers and has spoken out on human rights abuses and justice issues in Haiti since 1995. Since February 2004, BAI has received most of its financial support from the Institute for Justice & Democracy in Haiti (IJDH). Mario Joseph, human rights and criminal lawyer, has co-managed or managed BAI since 1996. In conjunction with IJDH, BAI initiated and runs the Haiti Rape Accountability and Prevention Project (RAPP) to respond to the epidemic of rapes against poor women and girls in Haiti in the wake of the January 2010 earthquake. RAPP provides individual victims of sexual assault the legal services they need to obtain justice and compensation. At the same time, the organization works with allies in Haiti and abroad to transform the underlying social context that renders poor Haitian women vulnerable to assault and exploitation.
Institute of Social Work and Social Science (ETS)	An internationally supported educational institution located in Haiti that was founded in 2011 to provide undergraduate social work and social science training in both theory and practice. A Haitian Creole program is offered for student who wish to complete intensive coursework in Haitian Creole and also for researchers and development workers who wish to learn Creole while working in Haiti. Courses are designed to introduce students to social work and practice while developing essential skills.
The Multidisciplinary Association for Research and Advocacy in the Kivus by United Junior Academics (MARAKUJA)	A multidisciplinary non-profit association for research across conflict-affected provinces and weakly-institutionalised environments in eastern DRC (Network of 100+ researchers; based in Goma). The implementation of the DRC research was devolved by MARAKUJA, who was contracted to employ fieldworkers, oversee logistics and administrative issues. The managing director of MARAKUJA also advised on security-related aspects, such as how far outside the city centres recruitment sites could be extended safely.
La Solidarité Féminine Pour La Paix et le Développement Intégral (SOFEPADI)	A female-led nongovernmental organisation that promotes women's rights across DRC: safety, security, education, health, equality, and justice (Network of 50+ activists and social workers; eastern base in Beni). SOFEPADI was instrumental in informing a research design that was sensitive to the local culture. Further, as a women's rights organisation, they had the necessary contacts to set up a comprehensive referral system for participants in need of psychological, social or legal services and provided resources and support to study participants.