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'At the end of their relationship, that man offered her a house': Qualitatively exploring Congolese women's agency in navigating sexual relations with UN peacekeepers within the context of a patriarchal setting in eastern DRC

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ABSTRACT

The UN's Zero Tolerance Policy, which bans all relationships between UN staff and locals, portrays all relationships as exploitative, fails to account for nuances in these relationships and does not acknowledge the agency of local women or communities. This study uses community-based qualitative data from eastern DRC that shares narratives on a wide variety of consensual relationships between peacekeepers and local women. Our paper uses a data-driven approach, including a post-colonial feminist lens, and ideas of structural agency to provide an expanded definition of agency that invites readers to re-examine their views of women in conflict settings. Finally, we provide clear recommendations for the UN and other international non-governmental agencies on policies related to sexual exploitation and abuse.

Introduction

Background

Since the 1990s, the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has experienced protracted conflict and civil war, which was sparked by a massive influx of refugees fleeing the 1994 Rwandan genocide (Kwon, 2009). The conflict which has since evolved to include political actors, and hundreds of rebel groups fighting to control lands, and valuable mineral resources (Iguma Wakenge et al., 2021), is ongoing and has resulted in approximately 6 million deaths, 5.4 million internally displaced people (IDP), severe sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and a myriad of egregious human rights violations (Mukwege et al., 2010; Parens, 2022). As a result of the ongoing conflict, the UN Organization Mission in the DRC (MONUC) was introduced in November 1999, charged with monitoring the implementation of a ceasefire agreement (the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement)

(Nagel et al., 2021; Spijkers, 2015). In July 2010, MONUC was eventually replaced by MONUSCO (UN Stabilization Mission in Congo) which maintained the same mandate, with a reduced mission size (Nagel et al., 2021, p. 4).

Despite the ongoing presence of MONUSCO, and international non-governmental organisations (INGOS), the DRC continues to struggle as a fragile and conflict affected state (FCS) (World Bank, 2022), and has some of the poorest development, gender and health outcomes worldwide. Although vastly biodiverse, and flush with natural resources, DRC is among the five poorest nations globally, with 64% of its population living below the poverty line (World Bank, 2022).

As of 2021, DRC ranked 151 out of 179 countries, on the gender equity index. The completion rate of primary school is 75%, however, because of poor-quality schooling, 97% of Congolese 10-year-olds are unable to read or understand simple text. Additionally, only 16.8% of women in DRC have completed secondary school (World Bank, 2022).

Limited access to education for girls and women can lead to early marriage, which has adverse effects on health outcomes including higher average fertility rates and experiences of violence. Women without any formal education have an average fertility rate more than 2.5 times higher than women who have completed secondary school. Across the DRC, half of women have reported physical violence and nearly one-third have reported sexual violence (often by an intimate partner). Finally, women tend to earn less money and own fewer assets compared to men. Although women's participation in the labour force is relatively high (62%), this is mainly in informal agricultural practices (World Bank, 2022).

There are clear gender-based differences in access to education, employment, income and health, with women and girls being continually disadvantaged (Cano, 2019). These differences are symptomatic of the patriarchal nature of and ingrained traditional gender roles in DRC society (Braunmiller & Dry, 2022; Code de la famille de la RDC, 2017; Latek, 2014). Within this patriarchal context, several attempts at peace-accords, establishment of a democratic government, influx of INGOs and the longstanding presence of a UN peacekeeping force have failed to bring stability to the region (Nagel et al., 2021, p. 12).

The UN and SEA allegations

Peacekeeper-perpetrated SEA in eastern DRC, and other UN peacekeeping operations worldwide, is well documented (Kent, 2005; Mushoriwa et al., 2022; Nordås & Rustad, 2013; Vojdik, 2022; Westendorf & Searle, 2017) and in some cases so prolific that the violence against the community has been perceived as the norm (Bartels et al., 2021). In many circumstances, it has resulted in the abandonment of peacekeeper fathered children, stigma and intergenerational poverty for the survivors and their families (Tasker et al., 2023; Vahedi et al., 2020). To prevent and mitigate SEA, the UN implemented a Zero Tolerance Policy (ZTP) against it. The ZTP bans any exploitative or abusive behaviour from UN staff, including peacekeepers, and strongly discourages sexual relationships with adult beneficiaries (UNSecretaryGeneral's, 2003). While, undoubtedly, this policy was meant to protect women and girls, it also paints all sexual interactions between peacekeepers and locals as exploitative, and portrays all women involved as 'victims', failing to recognise the agency some women exert when navigating consensual relationships with peacekeepers (Simic, 2009).

Women's agency

Horn et al. (2014) found that during the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, women became less dependent on men and more economically active. The study also showed how conflict brought an influx of INGO's which provided more information on women's rights and opportunities for empowerment. This is also true in eastern DRC, where dozens of INGO's, UN agencies and UN peacekeeping forces have been present since the 1990s.

The shifting roles and responsibilities experienced by women during conflict or displacement can lead to shifts in social, political and economic spheres, providing women with more choices

(Yadav, 2021). While these choices are still constrained by deeply entrenched patriarchal gender norms, and a faltering economy, the introduction of foreign workers, specifically UN peacekeepers, has given women in eastern DRC another economic choice to potentially secure their futures by accessing resources, and capital that are traditionally gatekept by men (Gibson et al., 2022).

Our study

This paper aims to illustrate more nuance in UN peacekeeper – civilian sexual relations, by exploring micronarratives that describe consensual sexual interactions between adults. This paper uses a post-colonial feminist lens, and structural approach to agency to examine community perceptions, and how women and their families use agency within contextual constraints, to navigate these sexual encounters.

As previously mentioned, peacekeeper-perpetrated SEA is well documented (Kent, 2005; Nordås & Rustad, 2013; Westendorf & Searle, 2017) and helps explain why a lot of research is focused solely on SEA, with more nuanced relationships, such as consensual ones, being less discussed in the context of peacekeeping operations (Simm, 2013; Vahedi et al., 2019). The discussion of consensual relations in this paper is limited to adult women, as sex with a minor is statutory rape, and therefore a clear form of SEA.

Given the clear power dynamics, whether local adult women can truly consent to a sexual relationship with a UN peacekeeper, is highly relevant. It is important to note that our definition of 'consensual' is data driven and relies on what the community, and women themselves have determined as consensual relationships. It is also similar to Vahedi et al. (2019), as an emphasis is placed on the participant's ability to understand the potential risks and benefits of engaging sexually with a peacekeeper. By doing so, we can explore these relationships with more nuance, acknowledge the local community's agency and recognise that painting all sexual interactions between UN peacekeepers and local women as exploitative, is paternalistic.

This paper will contribute empirical evidence on how women in eastern DRC use agency within societal constraints, to access new opportunities. Our paper adds to existing literature which invites readers to re-examine ideas on agency by placing an emphasis on collective action, and deconstructing the victim/empowerment paradigm and putting forward a more inclusive definition. Using community perceptions, and community-based data, our analysis will demonstrate how agency functions within structural constraints and how women in eastern DRC were able to manoeuvre within constraints inherent in patriarchal societies to access new opportunities.

Methods

Study setting and implementation

Our data originates from a mixed-methods study that examined community-level perceptions on interactions between UN peacekeepers in the eastern DRC, and women and girls in nearby communities. This cross-sectional study was conducted over a 9-week period between June and August 2018 and was geographically focused within a 30-km radius around six UN peacekeeper bases in 5 provinces (Tanganika, Chopo, Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu) and 6 towns (Kisangani, Beni, Bukavu, Bunia, Goma and Kalemie).

Due to the language and cultural barriers, two Congolese partners supported the implementation of data collection. Solidarité Féminine pour la Paix et le Développement Intégral (SOFEPADI), a non-governmental organisation working to advance women's rights and improve gender equity in DRC, provided two local female staff as research assistants. These staff members were experienced in working with vulnerable populations and particularly with survivors of SGBV. A further 10 local researchers (four male and six female) were provided by Multidisciplinary Association for Research and Advocacy in the Kivus by United Junior Academics (MARAKUJA) – a non-profit network of Congolese researchers. All 12 researchers participated in a 5-day training prior to implementation

which focused on standardised interviewing, data management, ethics and informed consent, management of adverse events and when/how to refer participants for external services.

Sampling and participant recruitment

Local researchers collected data using convenience sampling by approaching potential participants in public areas (shops, markets, parks, etc.) located near each of the six UN peacekeeping bases. Both males and females aged 13 and older were eligible to participate.

Sensemaker® survey and data collection

Data was collected using tablets equipped with a narrative capture tool, Cognitive Edge's Sense-Maker®, that records micro-narratives shared by participants. The SenseMaker® tool presented participants with three story prompts (Annex A). To avoid introducing reporting bias, the SenseMaker® survey did not directly prompt or ask about sexual interactions – even though the original study's aim was to better understand community perceptions of these interactions. Once a prompt was selected, participants were asked to share a brief narrative, which was audio recorded by local researchers. Next, participants were asked a series of questions aimed at contextualising their shared micro-narrative (who the story was about, what was the emotional tone), and multiple-choice questions to collect key demographic information.

The SenseMaker® survey and story prompts were originally written in English, translated to Lingala/Swahili by local partners, and then back-translated independently to ensure accuracy. All narratives and survey responses were later transcribed and translated from Lingala or Swahili to English by native Lingala/Swahili speakers.

Data selection

From the original data ($n = 2856$), a subset of 240 narratives were selected for inclusion for this study. Previous academic papers using this data explored sexual exploitation and abuse, and various forms of relationships. However, it was recognised by the team that additional data existed that had not yet been explored and appeared to hint at agency. Two researchers (GN and JP) screened all narratives manually to discern their viability for inclusion. Table 1 shows the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Stories discussing sex work or survival sex were excluded as consent was difficult to determine. As gift giving, including money and other goods, is an expectation within Congolese relationships, these stories were included.

Ethics

Informed consent was collected from all participants in their preferred language (Lingala or Swahili) and was recorded on the tablets. Both the consent and survey were conducted in a semi-private

Table 1. Exclusion and inclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria

- Stories that discussed consensual adult relationships between UN peacekeepers and local women
- Stories that showed women gaining new opportunities
- Stories that demonstrated agency

Exclusion criteria

- Stories describing any form of SEA and any mention of a minor under the age of 18
- Stories describing sex work or survival sex
- Stories without sufficient detail including those that the participant had only heard or read about

area. No identifying information was collected, and no financial compensation or incentive was offered as the data collection was relatively brief (~15 min) and no travel was required. A SOFE-PADI research assistant was on site to provide psychosocial support to participants as needed, and participants were provided with a referral card for additional counselling from SOFEPADI if required. Approval for this study was provided by the Congolese National Committee of Health Ethics (CNES) and by the Queen's University Health Sciences and Affiliated Teaching Hospitals Research Ethics Board.

Analysis

A thematic analysis of the data was conducted. To start, GN and JP used a hybrid process of inductive and deductive coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). First, data was coded in Nvivo12 using a predefined set of theory and literature-driven codes developed by GN and JP (Decuir-Gunby et al., 2011). GN and JP split the data in half and systematically applied the deductive codes to all data. During the analysis and coding process, both researchers added new codes inductively, based on ideas that emerged from the raw data. Then the initial code list was revised to incorporate these codes. 20% of the data was coded by both researchers to ensure consistency. Codes and sub-codes were grouped into themes, and the relationships between these themes were further explored with SB and SL. Finally, data was triangulated using relevant academic literature that explored post-colonial feminist ideas, and structural agency – the idea that agency exists within structural and societal constraints (Stones, 2015). The analysis centred the voices and experiences of women using a post-colonial lens (Tyagi, 2014), by taking a largely data-driven approach. As our working definition of agency (see Results) is based on collective action, family, and community play an important role in creating agency. Later themes, such as community perceptions, help explain the societal structure within which women and their families are exhibiting agency. The analysis plan was led by GM (a Congolese independent researcher) to ensure the data was contextually grounded.

Results

The original study collected 2856 narratives. Of these, 240 were included in the final analysis. 54% of respondents in this subset were female and 46% were male. The proportion of participants from each study city is as follows: Beni (13%), Bukavu (7%), Bunia (25%), Goma (5%), Kalemie (6%) and Kisangani (43%). Participants ranged in age from 13 to 64, with the largest proportion of participants (42%) falling between the ages of 25–34. The majority (87%) of narratives were third person, about a friend (64%), a relative (22%) or acquaintance (3%). A minority (12%) were about the individual sharing the micro-narrative and 1% narrated something the respondent had heard or read about. 62% of the stories in our subset were labelled as positive or strongly positive by participants, 26% as negative/strongly negative, and 12% as neutral, or no response. Spelling and grammar errors in the selected quotations have been corrected to facilitate comprehension. Some additions have been made, in brackets.

Themes

Risks + opportunities

Risks encountered in the shared narratives were infrequent. 15% of our sample experienced a risk while engaging with a peacekeeper. Risks included unplanned pregnancies, being abandoned by the peacekeeper without sufficient support, abortion, job loss, being rejected by their family (stigma), and in 2 cases, women neglected their education for their relationships with peacekeepers. From the micro-narratives, it appears as though none of the women were left destitute because of these risks, and were often supported by their families or other community members.

Opportunities included assets, capital, livelihoods, resources, child fees, dowries, marriage or social mobility. Many narratives listed multiple opportunities experienced by the woman, while some had none. Table 2 provides more details.

Agency

Shared narratives described relationships between consenting adults. The women involved had choices available to them, and many women and families demonstrated agency with their actions. We approach agency from a structural viewpoint, by understanding that society can influence and constrain agency in various ways (Stones, 2015, p. 1). We define agency as, an individual or collective, from an oppressed group, acting in a way that flouts gender expectations (Kabeer, 1999; Petesch, 2022), acting in a way that turns things to their advantage (Carswell & Neve, 2013), or acting to achieve desired objectives (Muñoz Boudet et al., 2013), through negotiation, influence or subversion.

The ways in which women and their families demonstrated agency varied and included: dating multiple men or multiple peacekeepers, ending their relationships, dating for a specific opportunity or by casually dating instead of seeking marriage. One example shows a woman dating a peacekeeper specifically to obtain a house, while another was gifted a house.

> The objective of that girl was to have her own house thanks to such a relationship she had with the man. At the end of their relationship, that man offered her a house. – ID 2182

> I fell in love with a Sudanese who was providing me with some food and money. Thanks to him, I own a house. Since he went to his country, we continue talking to each other over the phone. – ID 458

In another case, a community member recounts how three or four women from her community took advantage of the peacekeepers' presence to secure assets, suggesting a more casual relationship.

> Here were some girls who fell in love with MONUSCO agents. Those girls were lucky because about 3 or 4 girls took advantage of getting [a] portion of land after those agents had departed, so we were happy with that. – ID162

Table 2. Types of opportunities.

Type	Example	Quotes from data
Assets	House, car, motorbike, plot of land, financial support, etc.	A little time later, that man had a very good house built for the girl in the downtown of Kisangani. ID 1452
Resources	Phones, clothes, stocks of essential food, furniture, cash for daily expenses or education related fees etc.	She was coming home with clothes and phones that our father had never bought. ID 2431
Livelihoods	Income generation, improved socio-economic status, money for a business, informal employment, etc.	When the man was deployed to another country, he gave some money to his wife in order for her to start business … ID 1452
Capital	Educational degree, formal salaried employment or a significant number of assets	He was providing her with money. In addition, he bought a piece of land at Mutumbe … He even had the house built for her and a means of transportation. ID 1590
Social Mobility	Any change (positive or negative) in a person's social capital	Formerly, she was selling avocados … . one of them made her pregnant and went away to his home country … Unexpectedly, the white man sent money to her to buy a plot of land, and then he sent again money that they used to build a house. Nowadays, she is now selling computers, shoes … ID 217
Child Fees or Support	Money given specifically for a peacekeeper fathered child, or other children the woman entered the relationship with	That girl had a peace baby with an expatriate working for MONUSCO. That agent bought a house and a car [for] the girl. At a certain moment, that man departed, but he always sends money to his wife and child. Now that girl lives very well. – ID1457
Dowry or Marriage	Money given to the family either to date or marry the daughter OR for a legal or civil marriage union	They fell in love with each other. And now they are both in Uruguay because he married her before they travelled. ID 1641

Another participant reports how she benefitted from her relationship with a MONUSCO agent by gaining an undergraduate degree, she explains it would not have been possible without him.

> In fact, I was dating with an agent of MONUSCO … I spent four years with him. I went to the university thanks to him. Up to now I keep on with studies, despite his departure, I have good recollection of him. If people call me undergraduate it's thanks to him, any way he was a nice man. ID 273

Family support

Many women (often with the support of their family) demonstrated agency by leaving a relationship with a peacekeeper or refusing marriage. Family support also emerged in terms of protection or accountability. Specifically, some family members protected women by discouraging them from engaging with a peacekeeper or moving to his home country.

> That man decided to meet up with the girl's family. The man wanted to marry that girl, yet her father didn't want to marry his daughter to a MONUSCO agent. It brought misunderstandings between the child and the father. The father sent his daughter somewhere so as for her to study. ID 1798

Other cases had families push for financial support, or other economic support for their daughter in case she became pregnant, or for accountability after she had already been made pregnant.

> At a certain time, my cousin was pregnant. So, the family wanted to know [who was] responsible for the pregnancy; she said that it was by a MONUSCO agent. They pursued him, and he came and gave what he was supposed to give to the family. ID 587

Relationship types

Women also demonstrated agency by flouting gender expectations, by making decisions to casually or socially date instead of intentionally seeking marriage, as is expected. Some lived together without being married or birthed the peacekeepers' children without marriage, and some were only casually dating. In one case, a young woman casually dated a peacekeeper until she found a husband.

> She was falling in love with a MONUSCO contingent … . She was living with him very well without any problem. They were living together even though the girl was still at her parents. When that man was sent to Kisangani, they went together. They continued living together until that girl found a husband, then they split. ID 167

Choice

By exploring women's agency in these micro-narratives, we can see that choice was another key factor. Having multiple contingents of soldiers present or being a second wife or partner, offered different choices for women to secure their futures.

> My sister was often having sex with a MONUSCO guy here at Kalemie. Later, he married her actually. When he ended his Kalemie MONUSCO mission, he went back home with my sister. He took her to his home country where he had another wife. We heard the first wife welcomed my sister very friendly. The man finally separated the two wives, each living at her own house. Today the man has two children with my sister, and they are living well. ID 1497

In one case a woman decided to abandon her Congolese husband for the potential opportunities that dating a MONUSCO peacekeeper could bring.

> She was married to a Congolese soldier before, but when the MONUSCO South Africans came, she abandoned her husband and got tied to one of them. The guy built a small house for her, a house of about 25 or 30 iron-sheet[s] in her parents' compound. ID 1745

In another, a respondent explains how one woman navigated multiple relationships with many different peacekeepers to access economic opportunities that would have otherwise been impossible to achieve.

> She changed MONUSCO agents. If she stops with him, she takes another one … and they gave her a lot of money. She was funded easily, she could pay [for] cars and this helped even to support her family. She opened a shop; she could do business only with the money she was receiving from MONUSCO agents. ID 1869

This may suggest that engaging with peacekeepers was a choice taken to access opportunities. Another respondent explained that although women did have choice, these options were very much limited by the context, and entering a relationship with a peacekeeper affords more security.

> I have really noticed the importance of MONUSCO agents here in Kisangani. They really care for us. We graduated, but since that time, no job. Congolese [who] don't have jobs [have] to get married … . Foreigners know how to care for women … These people accept to live with a woman even though she has children. That foreigner can pay your school fees as well as your children's. They provide you with everything. Even when their time is finished, and they go to their country, foreigners can still send money … – ID 2638

We can see here that some encounters included an aspect of compromised choice. In these cases, the women involved were struggling, either with finances, school fees or finding work, and entered consensual relationships with a peacekeeper, which subsequently led to opportunities. One woman struggled to find work and dated a peacekeeper who was able to provide for her and connect her with others to find a job.

> When she finished her studies, she was looking for a job, [but] she could not find, so she fell in love with a contingent from Senegal who was living with her and had 3 children with her. Then the contract of the man ended, but before he left, he did his best to buy a house [for] her. He also made some representations to other people with a view to finding a small occupation … – ID 1508

A student was struggling to pay for her studies and decided to date a peacekeeper who subsequently helped pay for her fees.

> The second story of a girl who was living with me and studying here at UNILU … She had difficulty pursuing her studies. But [at] a given moment; she met a MONUSCO agent who fell in love with her. That man helped the girl so much [to] continue her studies … They live very well without any problem. ID 518

Community perceptions (explanations of structural constraints)

Perceptions of the shared micronarratives were largely positive, suggesting that the community appeared supportive of these relationships. When peacekeepers were perceived as sufficient 'providers', or 'honoured' the girl or her family, this was generally viewed positively by the community. Furthermore, these views provide insight into community norms and expectations when it comes to relationships in the DRC, and provides information about the structural constraints women and their families are operating in when they demonstrate agency.

Male provider + honour

The ideal of the male provider was important to study participants. Women who engaged in relationships with peacekeepers were expecting to be provided for. Some cases showed how the soldiers were missed when they returned home, because the women involved were no longer cared for in the same way, and others emphasised how generous the soldiers were in terms of providing assets or resources, or caring for children that were not biologically their own.

> I was living with a MONUSCO agent … . I lived with him as his wife because … My husband died while I had very little kids. That man of MONUSCO didn't have discrimination. He helped all; he was sending them to school, food, clothes, and shoes. He was a good parent to them. I was happy to live with him. Since he returned to his country, I am again suffering. We didn't have any problems with him. His mission was over, so he had to go back. ID 332

The idea of a hierarchy of desirability emerged, and it further enshrined the importance of a 'male provider' in this context. There appeared to be a consensus that three or four specific nationalities were more desirable for women to date, as their actions and abilities to 'provide' were perceived well

by the community. Certain nationalities were viewed as less desirable for women to date, due to the perception of their soldiers as not providing well.

> … among all these, [the] Beninese were the best guys … They even started speaking Swahili, our local language … One of them made a woman pregnant. His MONUSCO bosses tried to convince him to accept a transfer for another place to avoid the community attack, but he refused. He said he couldn't leave that pregnant woman alone in these terms; "I cannot leave my wife with this pregnancy". Later, he went back to Benin with her. Currently they are in Benin. ID 527

Honouring the family

Lastly, the idea of 'honour' also emerged. Honour presented itself in two ways. First, in the sense of demonstrating culturally appropriate respect for the family, generally through the provision of a dowry, to communicate worth. Second, by not committing sexual exploitation and not dishonouring the family or woman.

Several narratives explained the importance of the dowry and how peacekeepers had come to the family to honour them in exchange for dating or marrying their daughter. These acts were viewed positively by the community. This quotation demonstrates both examples of 'honouring'.

> He did not dishonour the girl with sexual abuse. He went to the family of the girl to present himself there and gave the dowry. So, they celebrated customary, religious, and civil weddings. ID 1582

In some cases, the women even returned with their husbands to their home countries.

> My sister was falling in love with a MONUSCO expatriate from France. That man honoured my sister and our family by marrying her. They now live in France with their 3-year-old baby. ID 601

The hierarchy of desirability also comes into play here, as one respondent explains that peacekeepers can honour Congolese girls and families better than Congolese men. It is implied that the peacekeepers honoured the family by providing a dowry, or other resources/ assets, once again demonstrating the importance of the ideal of a male provider.

> I would say about[the] joy I have concerning what one soldier from Senegal [did]. [He] took our girl to Senegal after honouring the family. He actually gave everything and had the wedding ceremony. I can say that these people are not destroying girls and women as people are used to saying. They are good people because they honour our girls more than our Congolese boys. ID 2128

Discussion

This study examined the use of women's agency in eastern DRC, to navigate sexual relationships with UN peacekeepers, within the structure of a patriarchal and FCS. Using community perceptions from the data, a post-colonial feminist lens, and structural approach to agency, we were able to demonstrate how women can possess and use agency, within societal constraints. Our results add to existing literature (Gibson et al., 2022; Kabeer, 1999; Logie & Daniel, 2016; Mohanty, 1984; Howell et al., 2019) all of whom examine agency through the lens of oppression or societal constraints (Jennings et al., 2022). We also offer a data-driven, and expanded definition of agency, that provides more nuance, is anti-hegemonic, and grounded in cultural relativism, to counteract the ongoing and pervasive victim/empowerment paradigm that is often attributed to women in conflict or low-income settings (Hoyt, 2007; Logie & Daniel, 2016). An adaptation of Kabeer's (1999) framework has been used to structure the discussion and show how agency emerged from the data set.

In this conceptual framework (Figure 1), we see how agency is used by women and their families to access new opportunities within the context of eastern DRC. Both contradictions within the patriarchal setting itself and the use of agency allow women (and their families) to gain access to new opportunities. Opportunities are defined as the use of agency to access new resources, assets, capital, livelihoods or other goods. We acknowledge within this framework that these actions are
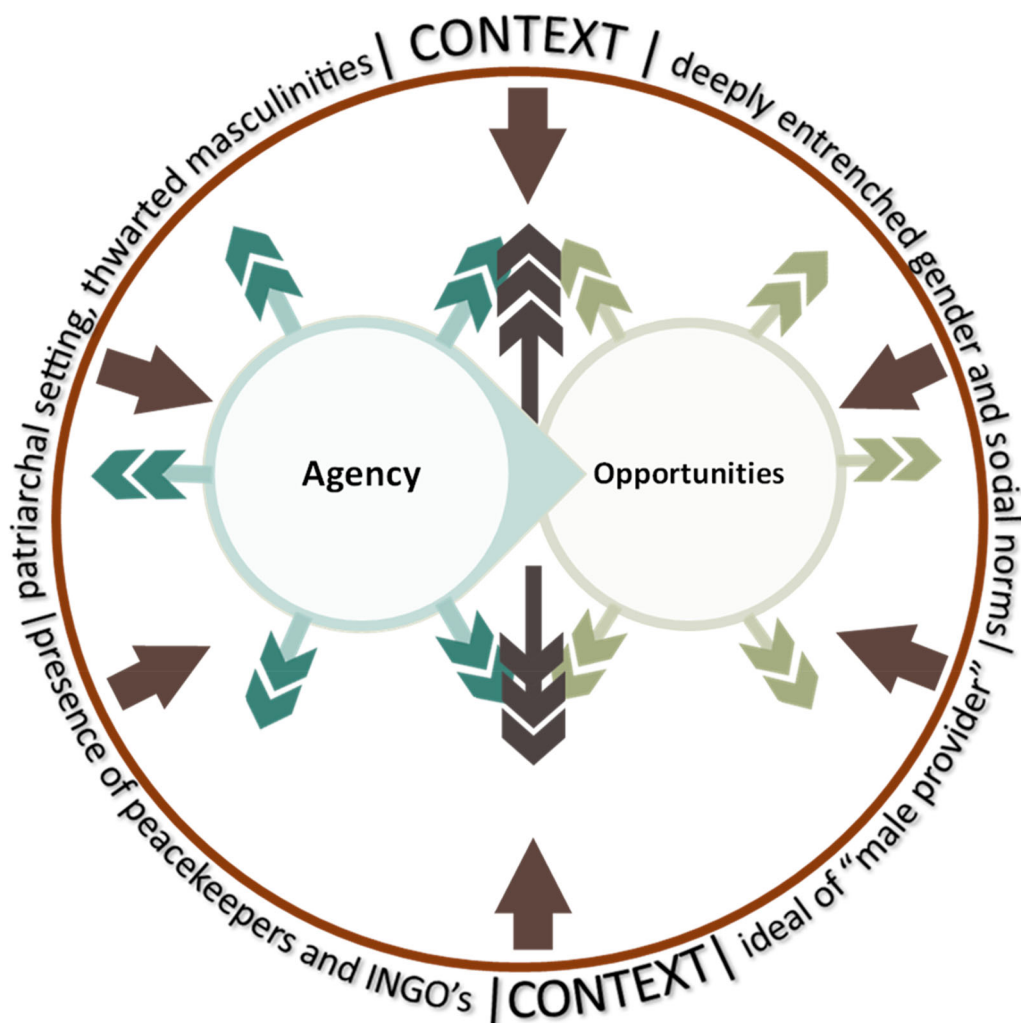
Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

conducted within the local context, including strictly entrenched gender and social norms, and the presence of peacekeepers and INGOs. Even though the context constrains women in some ways, our conceptual framework (Figure 1) highlights how they can push back or manoeuvre within this structure for their benefit and that of their families.

Context: dominant social norms

Eastern DRC remains a deeply patriarchal region, rife with strict gender and social norms. These norms exist within and have been shaped by the FCS setting, and prolonged presence of UN peace-keepers. To further our understanding of the context, we will explore the concepts of hegemonic and thwarted masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). We also look to Sultana (2012) to understand patriarchy as male domination in both private and public spheres, and how men use their power and control to ensure women remain subordinate. In the context of DRC, we see how patriarchal ideals are instilled in DRC legal structures, such as the 'Family Code', where until recently (Code de la famille de la RDC, 2017), women were legally required to 'submit to

their husbands' and gain their husbands permission before accepting a job, opening a bank account, or before conducting many other legal actions (Republique Democratiquedu Congo, 1984, p. 70).

Hegemonic masculinity is the idea that a predominant form of masculinity exists, which is culturally exalted, and often inculcated in society by those in power (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, pp. 830–833). In DRC, this concept presents itself as the domination of men, the subordination of women, and is instilled through patriarchal ideals and policies. It also inculcates strict, traditional social and gender norms, and studies conducted in DRC show how these norms dictate ideals for women, girls (Hilker et al., 2017; Horn et al., 2014; Mulumeoderhwa, 2022), and men, and boys (Lwambo, 2013). Women and girls are expected to seek husbands, get married, have children, and stay home to cook, clean and care for their children (Hilker et al., 2017, p. 3). Even if women or girls pursue higher education, it is often expected that they will not work once married and will fulfil their role as domestic housewives (Mulumeoderhwa, 2022, p. 1209; Oldenburg, 2015). Our data showed that when women or girls did engage in economic activities, it was generally done unofficially, such as selling or buying things at a market, selling phone credit or selling food.

On the other hand, men and boys are expected to go to school, find full time salaried employment, marry, and support their wives, children and even their extended family financially (Lwambo, 2013, pp. 51–52; Mulumeoderhwa, 2022, pp. 1201–1202; Oldenburg, 2015). This expectation to provide includes owning property, houses, land or vehicles, which would be traditionally passed down to a male heir, rather than a wife or daughter. Although laws regarding property ownership have recently changed, they are slow to be enforced or promoted (Syn & Mastaki, 2015). Ultimately, men are expected to provide and women are expected to remain home and fulfil domestic duties.

As hegemonic masculinity only considers idealised masculinities in a specific context and may miss out on more nuanced gender dynamics present in men's daily lives (Myrttinen et al., 2017), we also explore the concept of thwarted masculinity. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 838) explains how hegemonic masculinities can develop based on ideals of what men 'should' be and may not align with the realities of actual men. While Lwambo (2013) highlights how these discrepancies place high pressure on men in eastern DRC to fulfil their gender roles, while a failing economy, and unstable political situation often denies them the ability to do so, resulting in a sense of 'thwarted masculinity' (Myrttinen et al., 2017, p. 108). Additionally, as more women step into the economic sphere, men reported viewing this as a threat to their manhood, as women who are economically independent could leave them (Lwambo, 2013, pp. 54–55). Furthermore, the ideal of a 'male provider' is so deeply entrenched in gender norms across many cultures (including DRC) that there are well-known associations between the inability to fulfil this role and a sense of humiliation and vulnerability that can lead to violent outcomes (Teasdale et al., 2006).

Horn et al. (2014) conducted a study in two post-conflict countries (Liberia and Sierra Leone) and found that the wars resulted in women becoming more economically active, while the influx of INGO's provided more information on women's rights and opportunities for empowerment. Data from Lwambo would support that similar change is evolving in eastern DRC, although their study asserts that Congolese women's idea of empowerment 'is to demand respect, rights and liberties within a patriarchal system' (Lwambo, 2013, pp. 52–53).

Agency: within a patriarchal society

We have defined agency as individual or collective from an oppressed group, being able to act in a way that flouts gender expectations (Kabeer, 1999; Petesch, 2022), or that turns things to their advantage (Carswell & Neve, 2013), or to achieve desired objectives (Muñoz Boudet et al., 2013), through negotiation, influence or subversion (Kabeer, 1999). In our study, structure plays an important role in shaping women's agency, and their ability to work within the constraints of the existing patriarchal system to achieve opportunities, while simultaneously reinforcing these patriarchal structures. While seemingly contradictory, scholars (Gustafsson-Larsson et al., 2007) have shown that women's agency can, in fact, do both, challenge and reinforce hegemonic structures.

Agency in constrained settings

Logie and Daniel (2016, p. 128) also explored agency in a constrained setting, amongst IDPs in post-earthquake Haiti. After participation in a community-based HIV program, women demonstrated greater agency in negotiating for condom use, seeking HIV testing and revising gender roles within their relationships. Women also reported finding relational and collective agency from participating in these groups. King et al. (2020) also examined the use of Haitian women's agency in a constraint setting. Participants in the study explained how women would actively pursue consensual sexual relationships with peacekeepers, because as foreigners, they were perceived to be ideal partners.

Cole (2004) explored motivations of young women in Madagascar participating in transactional sex or transactional relationships. Their study found that the possibilities afforded by this informal sexual economy such as income, and resources, led to privilege and the redistribution of resources within the community. Although these studies originate from a different context, where the manifestation of patriarchy may not be comparable to DRC, we can explore similarities related to women's ability to manoeuvre and demonstrate agency within structural constraints.

Oldenburg (2015) explored sexual relationships in Goma, DRC, and found that love, sex and the provision of goods were all intertwined. The paper highlights several cases where women dated specific men in Goma to improve their economic circumstances and gain access to resources. Lwambo examined gender expectations in eastern DRC and showed that women were reinforcing patriarchy through the gendered expectations they placed on men; namely that men should support, guide and protect women (Lwambo, 2013, p. 52). These results were the same regardless of the woman's income or education level, indicating that women are seeking to gain access to rights within the existing patriarchal system (Lwambo, 2013, pp. 52–53). We see similar results from our study, as the women involved sought to gain access to opportunities by reinforcing the ideal of a 'male provider'.

Expanding definitions of agency

Our study contributes to a broader feminist effort aimed at expanding the dominant understanding of agency (Burke, 2012; Howell et al., 2019), by incorporating more subtlety and contextual grounding into its definition. We use a postcolonial feminist lens, and structural approach to agency, which centres women and their families. Additionally, it focuses on their ability to manoeuvre in unexpected ways, within the constraints of their context, often while continuing to perpetuate one or more forms of existing oppression. While this may appear contradictory, the idea of painting all women from complex class, religious, ethnic, racial or socio-economic backgrounds as victims, is paternalistic, and does not sufficiently acknowledge their abilities as competent adults in society.

Several postcolonial feminists (Mohanty, 1984; Narayan, 1997; Suleri, 1992) recognised that dominant ideas on agency, defined by western feminists, were limited in scope, and failed to acknowledge alternative forms of agency that did not align with empowerment efforts, or attempts for women to free themselves from patriarchy.

Mohanty asserted that 'third world women' have been painted as a homogenous group of victims, even in feminist literature. The mere existence of being a woman in a low-income setting was portrayed as diminishing and constraining their lives, with little consideration given to their ability to exert agency. Since the 80s and 90s, western feminist literature has grown and attempted to incorporate these critiques. For example, Burke (2012) looks at women's agency in gender-traditional religions and challenges previous western feminist scholarship, by focusing on four different approaches religious women use to assert their agency in a male-dominated social institution. Like Burke, our study does not attempt to find agentic actions that challenge existing contextual constraints, but rather looks at how agency exists within these limitations.

As Charrad (2010, p. 519) explains 'agency by definition includes inevitable ambiguity, since it is context-specific and involves contradictory aspects that cannot easily be disentangled'. Our study

further adds to this, by demonstrating that women can both exert agency and reinforce hegemonic cultural systems (patriarchy) simultaneously.

Opportunities: patriarchy and access to rights for women

In patriarchal societies like DRC, men maintain power and control in both private and public spheres (Sultana, 2012, p. 2). Although the context of FCS has limited Congolese men's ability to maintain this power and fulfil their traditional roles, it has also introduced new categories of men (foreign UN peacekeepers), with access to more power and control. In this context, our data shows how women leverage their proximity to this power to influence peacekeepers and gain access to new opportunities. Through both existing literature and our data, we also see how some women can use the inherent contradictions present in patriarchal settings to subvert them.

Howell explores women's agency in late medieval and early modern Europe in the book *Women and Gender in the Early Modern Low Countries, 1500–1750* and explains how women were able to express agency because of contradictions in the era's patriarchal system (Howell et al., 2019, p. 24). Some examples included the expectation of women in cities (Lyon, Copenhagen) to contribute financially to their families, even though the economic sphere was reserved for men (Howell et al., 2019, p. 23). Another example shows how Christian norms of daughterly submission and male leadership could be flouted 'because Christianity promised women equal access to the divine word'. This meant that a protestant daughter could potentially preach the faith, even though this is contradictory to other previously mentioned norms.

In our study, women were able to use the ideal of a 'male provider' to their advantage, by seeking out partners that could provide better for them, and leave them with their own assets, resources and capital. The idea of a 'hierarchy of desirability' supports this, and women were aware that soldiers from certain countries tended to provide more or better for their sexual partners. Participants were able to exploit the inherent contradictions in these norms to their advantage and manoeuvre in a way that both reinforced traditional gender norms (male provider) and flouted them (by accessing land and property) simultaneously. Additionally, several respondents made it clear that given the political and economic context in eastern DRC, peacekeepers were able to better provide for a woman, compared to a Congolese man. Although women were still accessing new opportunities through men (peacekeepers), and are, in some ways reinforcing the patriarchy, similar to findings by King et al. (2020), they exhibit agency by flouting norms, using subversion, and negotiation to turn things to their benefit, and by manoeuvring within, and manipulating contradictions in their existing contextual constraints.

Strengths and limitations

Data for this study was collected at population level and included a large original sample size of 2865 narratives, offering a broad array of viewpoints from the Congolese host community. After screening the original data, 240 qualitative narratives were included for analysis. This is a large amount of data for qualitative research and can help add to the evidence base demonstrating women's agency in constrained settings.

These results must be interpreted in the context of the study's limitations. First, despite efforts to gather perspectives from diverse contributors, the non-representative convenience sample limits the generalisability of the findings. Moreover, we had incomplete information concerning the exact figures, locations and personnel nationalities at the UN bases in eastern DRC. Although we tried to incorporate a varied selection of bases, we do not know to what degree those efforts were successful. Second, data were collected in Swahili and Lingala and were translated to English for analysis. It is possible that some nuances were missed as a result. Finally, some of the shared micronarratives were quite short, and no probing questions were asked for more information, meaning we may be lacking the richness and depth that is traditionally found in qualitative data.

Despite these limitations, the study possesses several notable advantages. First, by not directly asking about sexual encounters, the research allowed sexual interactions with peacekeepers to arise from a wider range of experiences, without biasing the results. The data was screened and coded independently by two researchers both of whom were familiar with the DRC context. Additionally, 20% of the included narratives were double coded to ensure codes and thematic groupings were applied in a standardised and systematic manner.

Finally, as eastern DRC is a fragile and conflict affected state, fraught with economic insecurity, ongoing violence and political instability, applying a victim narrative to women living within this context would be generally accepted. Our study goes beyond this narrative and adds to the literature by providing more nuance and cultural grounding related to women's agency in constrained settings.

Conclusion

Our study aimed to examine women's use of agency while navigating sexual relations with UN peacekeepers within the confines of an FCS and patriarchal setting. Our data showed how women were able to manoeuvre within the societal constraints to achieve specific objectives that would normally be unavailable to them. Women and their families were able to negotiate, influence and subvert norms to gain new opportunities, including assets, resources, livelihoods opportunities and capital. Our results also invite readers to re-examine their views of women in conflict settings, as western literature and media often portrays them as homogenous, and victims of their circumstances, with little ability to make decisions (Jennings et al., 2022; Mesquita, 2017; Mohanty, 1984; Schneider, 1995).

Our paper adds to existing literature that critiques the victim/empowerment paradigm and advocates for the need of more inclusive definitions of agency that are contextually grounded. We also demonstrate a need for the re-examination of the application of the ZTP. In its current state, the stringent application of the ZTP denies women choices and assumes that the power differentials at play negate the possibility for meaningfully consensual relationships. Some additional recommendations follow.

- For the UN: Re-examine the UN's ZTP and acknowledge that in some cases where relationships may be consensual, sending the peacekeeper home may cause more harm than good.
- For the UN: Hold individual peacekeepers accountable, perhaps by directly diverting their salary if a child results from SEA or consensual sexual relations.
- For the UN: If certain contingents have higher levels of SEA allegations, place sanctions or do not accept new troop contingencies from these countries until the allegations are addressed appropriately.
- For the UN: Reinforce the community-based complaints mechanisms in intervention areas, to ensure community members can place complaints related to SEA and other types of misconduct.
- For the UN: Adjust the existing survivor fund to ensure that survivors of peacekeeper perpetrated SEA are cared for, including payments for medical care, childcare and income to ensure the dignity and well-being of each survivor.
- For the UN and INGO's: Develop a more nuanced understanding of SEA which recognises the agency that some women do hold in navigating relationships with peacekeepers or other international staff, and which does not paint all women as victims.
- For the UN and INGO's: Use expanded definitions of agency and contextualised understandings of masculinities to inform program development.

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