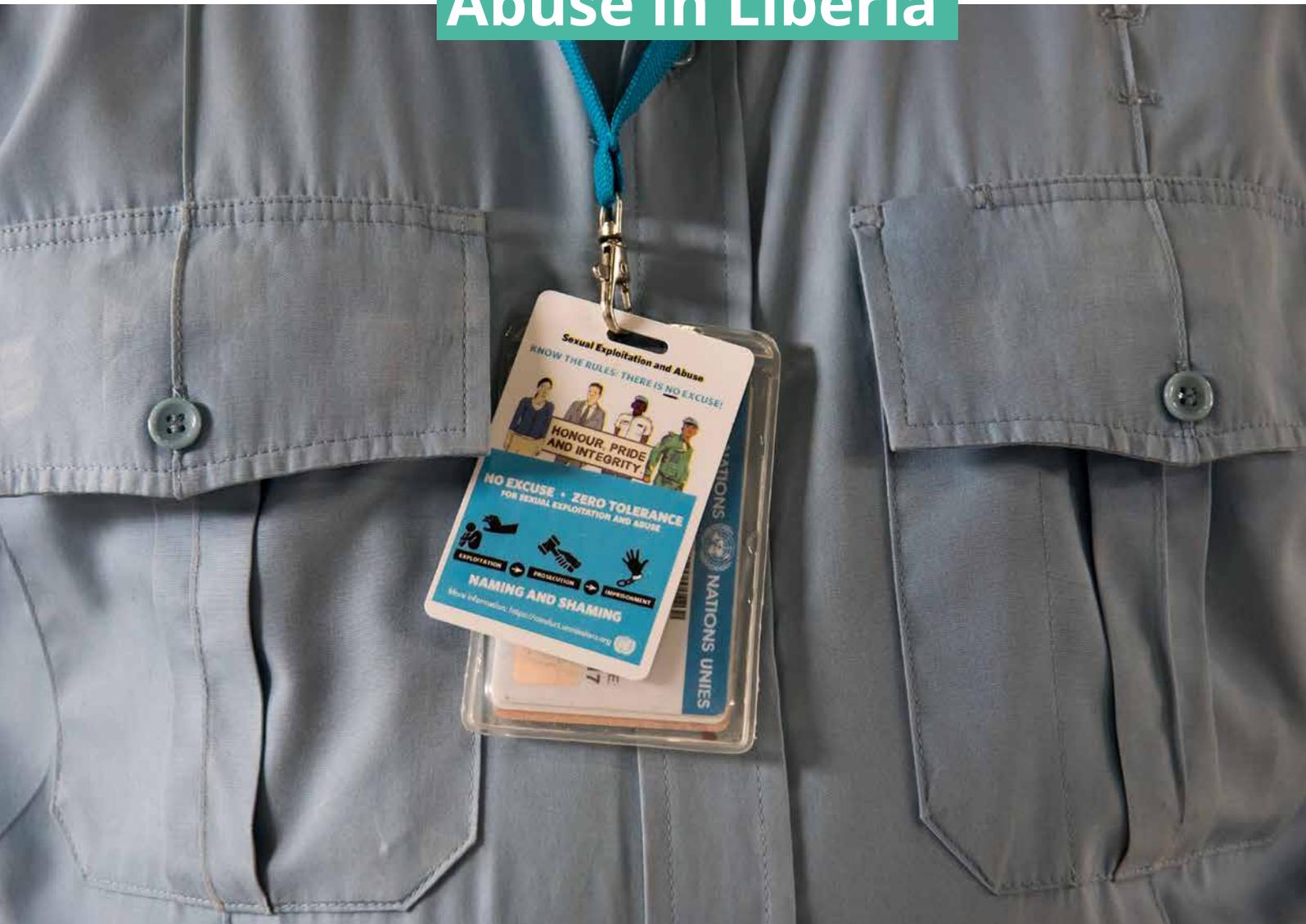


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# Safeguarding Children from UN Peacekeeper Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Liberia



**This publication is the result of a partnership between Keeping Children Safe and the University of Reading, as part of a research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the British Academy. The project focuses on how to safeguard children from sexual exploitation and abuse perpetrated by UN peacekeepers.**

Note: There are different terminologies adopted when discussing children with vulnerabilities, different needs, and victims/survivors of abuse. In this report, we use terminology that reflects language found in human rights and other international documents.

**Safeguarding Children from UN  
Peacekeeper Sexual Exploitation and  
Abuse in Liberia**

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*Introduction*

**The majority of the over 100,000 UN uniformed peacekeeping personnel perform their jobs with courage, dedication and professionalism. Yet those who commit sexual offences bring shame on the entire UN system and betray the trust of those that they have been sent to protect. There is a need for system-wide reform to ensure that such abuses cannot again occur with widespread impunity.**

Despite recent measures announced by the new UN Secretary-General, attempts to reform the system have been piecemeal and have not addressed a complex problem that requires nuanced and targeted responses. While there is general agreement at the UN, in member states, and from civil society, about what needs to be done to address the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers, very few practical solutions have been proposed let alone implemented. A key problem is that the current laws, policies and practices to tackle sexual exploitation and abuse operate across different scales, including at the international level, at the UN level, at the local level where the peacekeeping operation is being carried out, and within the countries that contribute troops to peacekeeping operations. As a result, very few effective solutions have been designed that can address the causes and consequences of peacekeeper sexual exploitation and abuse.

The project team has designed, and are now testing and implementing, an effective solution that can be adapted for use in all peacekeeping operations.

Our research demonstrates that work across and involving all of those scales can produce effective practical solutions to discrete aspects of this difficult problem. The research that we have conducted provides a robust methodology for implementing solutions to safeguard children in peacekeeping contexts. Our toolkit provides prevention, protection and safeguarding specifically in relation to children within peacekeeping.

The toolkit builds upon research funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and by the British Academy. The research provides the evidence-base for how to safeguard children from peacekeeper sexual exploitation and abuse. It is based on: desk research on law, human rights, and political science; qualitative data gathered from field research; and work with stakeholders. Using interdisciplinary research and through working with a comprehensive group of stakeholders, we have created an evidence-base for recommendations necessary to drive forward the research and policy agenda. The toolkit, versions of which have been implemented successfully in thousands of organisations in nearly every country in the world, is based on international standards for child safeguarding, and is implemented within an organisation through (i) a self-assessment of current policies and practices; (ii) a robust mapping of relevant local and international laws and practices on child safeguarding; (iii) developing context-specific policies, measures and procedures based on the organisation and the legal mapping; (iv) training, and (v) follow-up.

The project showcased in this report has a specific focus on the UN peacekeeping operation in Liberia – UNMIL – that follows up on the 2002 reports of widespread sexual exploitation and abuse of children within that peacekeeping operation. Using desk and field research, we have analysed the changes that have been made to policies and practices within the peacekeeping operation and UN country team over the past fifteen years since those initial reports. That research has involved doctrinal research on the laws, policies and practices within the UN and the host country, as well as the relevant international standards on child

safeguarding. Through a thorough exploration of current child safeguarding laws, policies and practices, ranging from training for peacekeepers through to reporting mechanisms and access to justice, we have identified the gaps and weaknesses, and designed a context-specific toolkit that will systematically address those issues and provide streamlined child safeguarding based on international standards and that is relevant to the peacekeeping operation in Liberia.

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## Background

### **In 2001 and 2002, responding to allegations of widespread sexual exploitation and abuse of children by peacekeepers in West Africa, the UN conducted an investigation into those allegations in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.**

The Secretary-General's 2002 report based on those investigations prompted UN action to address the causes and consequences of sexual exploitation and abuse. In particular, the definitions of sexual exploitation and abuse provided the basis for the UN's 'Zero Tolerance' policy contained in the Secretary General's 2003 Bulletin. Key recommendations included identifying areas where policies, procedures and practices should be put in place to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse.

Notably, however, the UN investigation did not find evidence to support the allegations that sexual exploitation and abuse were widespread. Those findings contradicted the earlier reports from consultants hired by Save the Children UK and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). In 2006, Save the Children published a discussion paper on children's vulnerability to exploitation and abuse during the delivery of assistance in Liberia. The field studies underpinning the report stemmed from the fact

that Save the Children UK staff working in Liberia had begun to notice that children, particularly young girls, were exchanging sex for goods and favours like food, money, hygiene products and other 'luxuries' like mobile phones, perfume, and being granted access to entertainment venues. Save the Children UK produced the paper to document the facts on the ground and to better protect and safeguard children during delivery of assistance.

Save the Children UK noted that key factors included severe economic deprivation, peer or family pressure, familial vulnerability, lack of awareness about what constitutes exploitation and abuse and lack of reporting mechanisms.

The paper concludes with a series of recommendations, many of which were relevant to the UN:

- **To All**  
 'To create and implement a government-led Ombudsman office that determines appropriate disciplinary and judicial responses to reported incidents'; 'to publicly demonstrate the workings and consequences of a new 'Zero Tolerance' policy upheld by all key actors'.
- **To the UN Secretariat**  
 'To identify why measures to date have been inadequate to enforce zero tolerance'.
- **To International Donors**  
 To 'hold their partners contractually accountable to report all incidents of sexual abuse and exploitation, and action taken, for project reporting periods'; 'to provide [girls and young women] with viable alternatives to transactional sex'.
- **To the Government of Liberia**  
 'To effectively implement legislation which prosecutes perpetrators of sexual abuse and exploitation'.
- **To Governments Contributing Troops to UN Peacekeeping Missions**  
 To 'hold accountable those troops who are engaged in the exploitation of children by ensuring they go through judiciary proceedings'; to 'ensure that any individual under investigation

who is found culpable of wrong-doing be immediately removed from the force and must not be rotated elsewhere’.

### — To UN Peacekeepers

To ‘reinforce more robust monitoring of troop conduct by reinforcing systems that would feed information directly to the head of the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), the UN Secretariat and to commanders in troop-contributing militaries for follow-through’; to ‘[e]xpand [the] role of the Conduct and Discipline Unit in Liberia’.

### — To UN Agencies

To ‘review the content and coverage of food ration distributions to remove food-related incentives for transactional sex’; to ‘review... their local partners and field-based staff and do regular checks to ensure local partners are abiding by codes of conduct’; ‘to train new staff on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse’.

A second Save the Children UK paper, in 2008, focused on other countries where sexual exploitation and abuse were widespread in UN peacekeeping contexts. Additional recommendations included: an effective local complaints mechanism for reporting abuse, and a new global watchdog.

More than a decade later, sexual exploitation and abuse of children within UN peacekeeping contexts remains a widespread and pernicious issue. Keeping Children Safe and the University of Reading therefore determined to undertake a project to provide practical solutions to safeguard children in UN peacekeeping contexts. Given the focus on sexual exploitation and abuse in Liberia since 2001, and the continued UN presence in the country, the project team conducted field research in Liberia to understand what changes have been implemented to address the issues in the early 2000s. That research forms part of a broader project that maps the laws, policies and practices at the UN, within peacekeeping operations, and in Troop-Contributing Countries, identifying good practices as well as gaps and weaknesses, and that forms the basis for a context-specific toolkit that safeguards children from peacekeeper sexual exploitation and abuse.

The United Nations peace operations in Liberia were a direct response to the civil war that ravaged the country between 1989 and 1997. The UN presence began in 1993 with an observer mission (UNOMIL) that took place in cooperation with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) operation established in 1990. Following Charles Taylor’s election as President in 1997, UNOMIL had achieved its principal objective. United Nations Peace-building Support Office in Liberia (UNOL) was then established to provide post-conflict peace-building, primarily to assist the Government with consolidating peace.

The Government and opposition were not able to resolve their differences, and there were continued systematic abuses of human rights in the country, leading to the resumption of civil war in Liberia. In 2003, the Security Council authorised the establishment of a multinational force in Liberia. The United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) is composed of political, military, police, criminal justice, civil affairs, human rights, gender, child protection, disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration, public information and support components, as well as an electoral component. That mission has remained in place to date.

The research in Liberia focused on how safeguarding children has been approached by UN entities, the Liberian government, and local communities. Through meetings with different individuals in a range of entities, we gathered data on current laws, policies and practices aimed at safeguarding children from sexual exploitation and abuse. Our benchmark against which that data was analysed are the International Standards on Child Safeguarding, and the Toolkit on Safeguarding Children from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Peacekeeping Contexts. Effective safeguarding requires measures to be implemented that uphold international laws and standards on children’s rights and criminal law, adhere to local laws and Troop-Contributing Countries’ laws governing their soldiers, and that implement UN policies and rules.



## Research

**The field research in Liberia included observational research and interviews with senior UN personnel in a range of UN entities, NGOs working on child protection, and national mechanisms undertaking aspects of child safeguarding. The research findings focus on three key areas in terms of changes made and outstanding issues that need to be addressed in: (1) the national infrastructure and systems, and (2) the United Nations internal work and external work. Clearly, the national picture has a significant impact upon preventing and remedying sexual exploitation and abuse, but the UN picture is crucial for tackling sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers.**

### National Infrastructure and Systems

Today, Liberia is a very different place to the times when it was in the middle of civil wars. When the UN and Save the Children UK reported on Liberia in 2002, the country had been through nearly two decades of civil wars and unrest. Large parts of the population lived inside Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps during that time, and the structure of the camps and severe economic deprivation within them were identified as key factors that contributed to widespread sexual exploitation and abuse of children and impunity for perpetrators. Liberia in 2017 is a country that still bears the scars of civil wars, but where significant rebuilding of the physical, political and social landscapes have brought significant and far-reaching changes. While there remains severe economic deprivation, the majority of people have been resettled outside of IDP camps, and the economy is growing and is more stable. This of course contributes to a greater ability to safeguard children from sexual exploitation and abuse. However, that contribution creates an environment in which safeguarding and accountability measures and initiatives may be implemented, but the onus remains on the government and the UN to safeguard children in Liberia. The political stability and stronger governance in present-day Liberia also contributes to an environment in which safeguarding measures and initiatives may be developed and implemented. A key part of the UN's mandate in Liberia is to strengthen governance, rule of law, and human rights. As interviewees

<sup>1</sup> Developed by Keeping Children Safe to improve child safeguarding in organisations worldwide.

<sup>2</sup> Developed by Keeping Children Safe and University of Reading to improve child safeguarding in UN peacekeeping.

emphasised, stability contributes to the creation, maintenance and improvement of policies and laws. At the national level there have been many improvements to policies, laws, and mechanisms. That being said, there remain many gaps and weaknesses, and there is also significant difficulty in implementing laws and in facilitating individuals' access to justice. Although there are now good national laws on safeguarding children from sexual exploitation and abuse (primarily the Children's Law of 2012), based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, interviewees insisted that the political commitment to implementing those laws does not exist because attention is devoted to other government priorities. The systems are overloaded, and there is ineffective leadership of key governmental departments tasked with child safeguarding and criminal justice.

The role of Liberia's government was repeatedly highlighted as being of critical importance to ensuring child safeguarding. The research highlighted that rape remains widespread, with 75% of all rape cases reportedly being child-rape with the age of victims/survivors ranging from a few months old to 17. It was emphasised that national protection systems frequently do not follow-up cases or allegations, and that the justice system rarely punishes offenders, with perpetrators easily able to bribe police or community leaders. The lack of institutional strength to tackle this environment in which abuses occur with impunity demonstrates the significant problems with achieving adequate implementation of national legislation.

Alongside the problems with implementing the laws is an ongoing need to improve societal awareness and protection, particularly for vulnerable groups. Currently there is no distinction between prostitution and transactional sex in Liberia. The low levels of education makes it difficult to raise awareness of what constitutes rape, and to break the cultural silence around sexual exploitation and abuse. Orphans, street children, children with disabilities and girls are particularly vulnerable groups. Only 4% of Liberian children are registered with the state at birth, which means that they have no citizenship rights, including to schooling, leaving them highly susceptible to sexual exploitation and abuse, and to child trafficking. What is more, lack of registrations makes it near-impossible to prove a child's age if there is any dispute as to whether they are 17 or 18 for the purposes of prosecuting statutory rape. Children with disabilities or learning difficulties are abandoned frequently, also leaving them vulnerable to significant harms. In-country child trafficking remains a widespread problem, with rural children taken to urban areas to be sex slaves or to peddle low value goods for no or very low compensation.

In particular, the following areas were highlighted in order to tackle sexual exploitation and abuse of children:

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

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

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

Education and awareness-raising about what constitutes sexual exploitation and abuse, and what can be done to prevent or remedy those crimes.

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

Strengthening justice mechanisms and improving access to them for victims/survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse.

Social protection changes, including policies influencing care that children receive within families, schools, and other institutions.

Governmental policies and national legislation on preventing and remedying child sexual exploitation and abuse by international actors such as the UN and NGOs.

Education and awareness-raising to change societal understanding of the traditional role of a child in the family.

## United Nations

UNMIL has taken many significant steps to safeguarding children from sexual exploitation and abuse since the reports in the early 2000s. A key factor arising in those early reports on sexual exploitation and abuse in Liberia was the lack of internal UN policies and practices – and the failure to implement those policies that did exist – on safeguarding children from sexual exploitation and abuse. In the 15 years since the exposure of these issues, the UN in Liberia has taken a number of steps towards safeguarding children, many of which are considered to be leading examples of good practice. That being said, and by the UN's own admission, there remain areas that require urgent and systematic attention. Central to the UN's work has been addressing its organisational culture, implementing UN policies and procedures, providing effective training, implementing reporting and accountability processes, and working with local populations through education and outreach activities.

Throughout the research, there were frequent references to disconnect between UN Headquarters (UNHQ) and the peacekeeping operation on the ground. It was highlighted that every peacekeeping operation is required by UNHQ to have a sexual exploitation and abuse task force, and there is UNHQ guidance on protection measures, but practices on the ground frequently do not reflect institutional promises. Interviewees explained that UNMIL has to take UNHQ general guidance and translate that into mission-specific context, because – in a lot of ways – UNHQ ‘says everything and nothing at the same time’. The other main challenge that was repeated throughout discussions was the need for specific child safeguarding measures that are separate from or go beyond the general measures combatting of sexual exploitation and abuse. One recommendation from a staff member in UNMIL was that the training materials provided by UNHQ should have a specific child safeguarding component as opposed to being focused on general sexual exploitation and abuse issues, which, for the most part, concentrate on adult issues.

UNMIL has taken a three-pronged approach to safeguarding children from sexual exploitation and abuse: (1) preventing misconduct, (2) enforcing rules, (3) assisting victims/survivors. This occurs through creating and implementing rules and policies, training staff, creating reporting systems, raising awareness among local populations about what to do if rules are broken or crimes committed, and holding accountable perpetrators and providing assistance to victims/survivors. In our research we focused on what is occurring on prevention and enforcement, and the areas where gaps and weaknesses remain.

## Prevention

Since UNMIL's inception, it has had a child protection brief that has included the monitoring and reporting of sexual exploitation and abuse cases and the advocating of child rights issues. Since the shrinking of UNMIL, however, many aspects of child safeguarding, including the child protection officer, have been handed over to UNICEF, who will maintain a country-presence after the mission leaves. The child protection policy and child safeguarding measures are informed and governed by the UN DPKO. UNMIL has created and implemented its own range of measures, including: a code of conduct and terms of reference for its staff, anti-sexual exploitation and abuse champions, hotlines, UNMIL Radio, and anti-sexual exploitation and abuse focal points. These all address children within their work, but there is no central focus on child safeguarding as a stand-alone topic.

Leadership has been crucial for preventing child sexual exploitation and abuse. The head (Special Representative of the Secretary-General – or SRSG), deputy head (DSRSG) of UNMIL, and senior leaders within UN entities in Liberia such as OHCHR – Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and CDT – Conduct and Discipline Team, amongst others, have provided particularly strong leadership and emphasis on combatting sexual exploitation and abuse even though they have not had direct instructions to do so from UNHQ. Although this is a priority for the CDT at UNMIL and at UNHQ, there remains a need for UNHQ to emphasise this issue as a key priority for all heads and deputy heads of mission. As it currently stands, child safeguarding within UN peacekeeping requires the right people in the right places.

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

Despite these measures and the improvements that they have brought, the following areas were highlighted by interviewees as needed to tackle sexual exploitation and abuse of children:

While there have been strong UNHQ efforts on sexual exploitation and abuse, very little, if any, of it is specific to children, and there needs to be specific initiatives on safeguarding children.

There is no emphasis or focus on ‘children’ beyond training that it is not permissible to have sexual contact with children under the age of 18. Child safeguarding clauses are not included as a matter of routine in staff contracts.

Soldiers should be trained on children’s rights, ideally prior to deployment. They should commit to ongoing training and to upholding laws and rules on child safeguarding through a code of conduct or contract.

Senior management should have regular training on child safeguarding, and those issues ought to form part of the daily briefings and marshalling of the contingents and be a constant agenda item in meetings.

Many interviewees emphasised the need to be able to vet personnel. There is currently no method for UNMIL to detect the background of peacekeepers or contractors, which is a problem compounded by poor record-keeping.

There is a need for greater emphasis on the fact that children cannot be used to procure sex.

There is also a need for clear definitions of ‘sex’ and ‘sexual activity’ that will be sufficiently broad to cover all activities concerned.

## **Enforcement**

A main area highlighted by the initial reports on Liberia was the impunity with which child exploitation and abuse occurred. Enforcement was non-existent of those rules that did exist. Alongside prevention activities, enforcement measures have been key to UNMIL addressing this issue. Enforcing laws, rules and policies requires work with local populations to raise awareness, creating reporting mechanisms, and implementing accountability measures. UNMIL has implemented a series of enforcement measures which, taken together, have made significant improvements over the past 15 years. However, problems persist, some of which relate to UNMIL, but many of which are as a result of gaps in UN and national laws, rules, policies, measures, and mechanisms.

Raising awareness of what constitutes sexual exploitation and abuse, and what to do when it is perpetrated by UN personnel, has been a main method for enforcing laws, rules and policies. That awareness-raising by UNMIL within local populations has largely occurred through education and outreach. The UN works with religious, cultural and community leaders, with schools, and with community organisations. Central to its work is a holistic policy to include as many different actors as possible. The UN ensures that it explains its sexual exploitation and abuse policy, and what it means for individuals within Liberia.

Education is crucial for prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse. Children in urban areas are more aware than their rural counterparts of what is acceptable and appropriate. Children's clubs in communities enable children to be part of their own protection. Schools with specific curricula aimed at education on sexual exploitation and abuse are central to those efforts. One example is the ECOMOG School, made up of children fathered by ECOMOG soldiers. UNMIL Radio is a main method of outreach and awareness-raising. As mentioned, UNMIL Radio reaches the vast majority of the population, and crucially is not biased in terms of sponsorship or political affiliation. In addition to its segments that are run 'by children for children', the station hosts monthly sessions by the CDT. Important for certain rural communities especially are the awareness-raising programmes that are delivered in various local Liberian dialects.

Awareness-raising measures are only useful when accompanied by strong reporting and accountability processes. UNMIL personnel identified weaknesses in terms of UNHQ reporting processes, as compared with UNMIL ones in which they had greater confidence. A major issue identified is the cultural barriers to reporting in Liberia. Abuse is a known issue, but many people are reluctant to report incidents. It was noted that children's peers tend to know of abuse, but that children often do not report those incidents to adults within their families or communities, and that there is a significant need to improve intergenerational reporting in order for those allegations then to be brought to the UN. Power dynamics, money imbalances, and lack of assurances of safety are all factors in children being reticent to report abuse. There is also a cultural trend of 'normalcy' amongst children because there are so many incidents amongst their peers, which leads to acceptance of exploitation and abuse as part of life. Moreover, even when allegations are reported, however, it is unclear that the UN or national mechanisms provide support to the victims/survivors.

Accountability is crucial also crucial to effective prevention. However, accountability is the weakest area of all activities aimed at combatting child sexual exploitation and abuse. On the one hand, when reports are made, there are stronger accountability mechanisms than existed 15 years ago. But those mechanisms are not yet sufficiently strong or streamlined across the system. The UN staff are seen as thorough in their investigations, but the outside impression is that the mechanisms are very slow. Frequent practice is to focus solely on the perpetrator, not on the Head of Contingent or other senior staff with responsibility for personnel who work for them. Where there is an allegation against soldiers, there is little that the UN can do other than to refer the allegation to the Troop-Contributing Country, which means that accountability processes are complex and opaque, as well as slow. However, in recent years pressure from donors and from the public has changed for the better the approach to accountability by all actors.

The following areas were highlighted by interviewees as needed to tackle sexual exploitation and abuse of children:

A key challenge is how to make institutional culture one of accountability, and how to streamline effectively that accountability culture across all UN activities.

Measures are required to address and tackle the culture of normalcy surrounding exploitation and abuse. This will be a crucial step for increasing reporting of incidents and crimes.

There is a need for greater work between all entities, so that there is effective link-up and streamlining between all monitoring and reporting activities.

Greater transparency and effectiveness is required to prevent the current situation where many allegations and cases are covered up or quietly dropped by national authorities.

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

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

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

Soldiers ought to have a double deterrent of the threat of being punished by the UN and by their home countries.

Accountability ought to extend to senior leaders whom ought to be held responsible when personnel under their command perpetrate child sexual exploitation or abuse.



## Research Findings

The research findings are grouped within the seven standard areas that Keeping Children Safe uses when assessing an organisation's approach to child safeguarding:

### **1 Where, when and how do programmes, staff and operations impact upon children, and what risks may these present:**

Organisations should carry out pre-deployment risk assessments, identify where, when and how their personnel and associates (civilian, military and external contractors) come into contact with children, identify the possible risks of harm such contact may pose, and develop strategies to mitigate the risks.

While we did not find specific examples of risk assessments, the research indicated that informal or non-standardised practices in relation to child safeguarding exist and are implemented across UNMIL and UN entities. Formalisation and standardisation of those child safeguarding processes would benefit all UN entities in Liberia. Those assessments ought to be transparent and made publicly available in order that UN staff, other international actors, and local communities and their representatives may access those documents.

### **2 What policies and procedures are needed to prevent harm and how are concerns responded to appropriately:**

Firstly, all organisations whose work affects children need to develop a clear child safeguarding policy that prevents harm to children and outlines what measures are in place to respond when safeguarding concerns arise. It should state explicitly that the organisation is committed to safeguarding all children, irrespective of ability, ethnicity, faith, gender, sexuality and culture. The policy should describe how an organisation will identify and manage risk and also recognise that types of risk may vary according to the child and that the means of addressing risks may also vary.

A child safeguarding policy provides an overarching commitment to preventing harm to children. The policy should refer to organisational policies and procedures in all areas of the organisation that support child safeguarding and include confidential reporting mechanisms for child safeguarding concerns.

It needs to be translated to ensure all staff and associates understand it and presented in a manner that is readily understood by all relevant communities, including children.

Reporting procedures must be transparent, efficient, confidential and clearly communicated to children using child-friendly resources, so that victims/survivors know how to lodge and track complaints, and for the subject of the complaint to know when and how their case will be definitively decided, as well as for those responsible for the investigation to keep track of the whole process.

In Liberia there have been significant efforts to communicate policies and procedures on sexual exploitation and abuse. Alongside the efforts focused on communication to UN personnel there is extensive outreach to children and communities. Those communications occur through radio stations, community programmes, schools and education, and through initiatives such as the visible cards that UN staff wear explaining how to report sexual exploitation and abuse.

Greater levels of communication, standardisation of communication, and the ability to reach rural as well as urban areas, are key areas that need addressing. Context-specific standardisation of practices would ensure that communication reaches all children.

Secondly, procedures should be in place to hold all staff to account on their responsibilities, duties and obligations in respect of reporting, and for designated staff, tracking and investigating complaints. Where any staff member, including those in mission leaderships and command authorities, fails to take action, they should be subject to disciplinary procedures.

In Liberia the UN 'Zero Tolerance' policy and reporting procedures are made clear and are highly visible. Additionally, extensive efforts were made to communicate them widely, for example through posters, badges, training, staff briefings and newsletters.

UNMIL would benefit from a specific UN child-safeguarding policy and procedures to be used alongside the 'Zero Tolerance' policy. That would address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of children, not just in relation to sexual exploitation and abuse but also other types of risks such as physical or emotional abuse.

### **3 How to recruit safely:**

Recruiting safely requires an organisation to outline its commitment to child safeguarding at the earliest opportunities in recruitment adverts, interviews, and as part of employment contracts. Staff should be recruited with clear job descriptions that include a statement about the employee's responsibilities to meet the requirements of the organisation's child safeguarding policy. All interviews should include a discussion on child safeguarding, what this means for the candidate, and the organisation's commitment to safeguarding. Employment offers for positions that involve direct contact with children, or access to children's information, should be dependent on suitable references and criminal record checks.

A main challenge identified in Liberia is the difficulty of screening and vetting when recruiting or hiring personnel. There are significant difficulties at the national and international levels in terms of procuring background checks, despite the UN Human Rights Due Diligence Policy requiring UN entities to ensure that such checks have been done. Those problems are compounded by Liberia not having universal birth registration.

A second problem that exists in Liberia and in many other countries is that when where police background checks exist, they are only relevant up until the date they are done on, and usually they only show convictions rather than raising any other relevant flags or concerns.

**The following checklist provides good practice in safe recruitment, and may be adapted for UNMIL and other UN peacekeeping operations:**

- Analyse the role and assess the potential child safeguarding risks when designing the job description.

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- Develop clear job descriptions and terms of reference for all posts, including for short-term contracts and for consultants.

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- Ensure sure that the selection-criteria outlines the relevant experience needed if the post involves direct work with children.

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- Ensure that the commitment to keeping children safe is included in details of any post sent to prospective job candidates.

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- Develop application forms that ask for consent to gain information on a person's past convictions/pending disciplinary proceedings.

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- Require documentation to confirm identity and proof of relevant qualifications.

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- Plan the interview process and ensure the interviewers have the relevant experience of and knowledge about child safeguarding and best practice.

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- Include specific interview questions that draw out people's attitudes and values in relation to the protection of children.

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- Require up to three references including from previous employees or others who have knowledge of the candidate's experience and suitability to work with children.

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- Verify the identity of referees.

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- Conduct as many background checks as possible.

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- Consider the use of probationary periods of employment to ensure suitability once in post.

**4 What safeguarding induction and training is needed to ensure staff know what the organisation expects of them and what should be done if they have a concern:**

Safeguarding training and inductions ought to ensure that staff understand the problem of child abuse and their role in safeguarding children and are able to promote the safety and protection of children with which the organisation has contact. This includes identifying specific risks and issues within the organisation and mitigating them, supporting implementation of practical measures within their organisation designed to keep children safe and recognising and responding to actual or potential child safeguarding issues and incidents.

Training on preventing sexual exploitation and abuse, and on the UN 'Zero Tolerance' policy, is mandatory for all UNMIL personnel. Although this training complies with UN standards, the child protection aspects are not formalised or standardised across UN missions and entities.

An important step is to include specific training on child safeguarding in UN training on sexual exploitation and abuse. A related component is to ensure that all designated investigatory staff have undertaken training in investigating serious child-safeguarding allegations so that when a complaint is made all actions that are taken are done so in line with the best interests of the child. In particular, there should be specialist training on investigative interviewing of children, witnesses and suspects of complaints so as to avoid re-traumatising the child and to secure high-quality evidence.

## **5 Does the organisation have a clear code of conduct so that all staff understand their professional boundaries when working with children and what is and is not acceptable behaviour:**

A code of conduct is a clear and concise guide of what is and is not acceptable behaviour or practice when employed or engaged by the organisation. All staff and associates should agree to the code of conduct when they are employed and/or start their job. It is an essential element of an organisation's child safeguarding policy and, when implemented properly, should reduce or limit the risk of child abuse occurring. It should also be made clear what action the organisation will take if the code is broken or not followed correctly.

Staff who work for organisations with a child safeguarding policy and code of conduct need to follow that code within and outside of the workplace. This means adopting appropriate behaviour themselves and reporting on concerns they have about a child whether in work or outside.

The code of conduct was extensively promoted in UNMIL. This included many different channels of promotions and reinforced for staff and communities through a range of good practice measures, including accessible internal and external visual, written, and aural communications.

One example of good practice from UNMIL is that all staff members are required to wear a 'Zero Tolerance of SEA' badge alongside their UN badge. The text on this badge reads: *Sexual Exploitation and Abuse is unacceptable behaviour. Failure of command and control regarding SEA is also subject to appropriate disciplinary measures. If you have concerns, or if you witness SEA you must report it.* The badge provides a number and email address for reporting and had been translated into a number of languages. Another example is that UNMIL Radio, which reaches more than 80% of the population, reinforces key aspects of the Code of Conduct, and explains to local persons what they may do if that code is breached.

## **6 Who is the appropriate designated person/people to act as the focal point in an organisation to receive and manage any safeguarding concerns and subsequent inquiry/investigation:**

All organisations should have a designated person responsible for making sure that the child safeguarding measures are integrated throughout the organisation and who acts as a focal point in that regard. This role should reflect the nature and structure of the organisation, and the person should be sufficiently senior enough and have sufficient support and resources to carry out the role. At each appropriate level or setting there should be a named person or persons to whom individuals may talk about child safeguarding matters. Those persons and their availability need to be widely communicated to staff and communities.

Child Safeguarding Focal Points will also need to be able to identify and liaise with sources of support for children and their families.

The Conduct and Discipline Team within UNMIL is the designated entity for receiving and managing safeguarding concerns and subsequent investigations. Greater transparency on those processes would be beneficial for victims/survivors, for their representatives, and for communities.

## **7 Is there a context-specific and appropriate reporting and responding process for incidents and concerns:**

Child safeguarding measures must be integrated in an organisation's systems and processes for different country and local contexts. The measures have to work for the local context and also adhere to global and regional standards. Definitions of 'child' and 'child abuse' may differ according to national and cultural understandings. However, organisations need to be clear that 'children' are defined as anyone under 18 years old, and that 'abuse' is the range of acts, intentional or otherwise, which harm children.

Organisational systems and processes for running organisational business may differ across offices, regions and countries. They must be risk assessed in each locality and strategies developed for integrating child safeguarding where relevant. The UN should also be prepared to take action locally where concerns arise, which will require information on local authorities and services to be widely circulated and understood.

Investigatory procedures should follow a well-defined operational strategy, be clear and communicated in child-friendly language, be simple to understand, and be transparent, confidential and timely. Investigations should be carried out by trained staff with relevant expertise in investigating serious child-safeguarding allegations and investigative interviewing of children who have experienced severe and marginalisation, as well as witnesses and subject of complaints.

In Liberia there are a wide range of internal and external outreach activities to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse, and to facilitate reporting. This includes extensive outreach to schools and community leaders, development of a wide range of communications materials with prevention messages and a reporting hotline. Examples of good practice include t-shirts, posters, exercise books, and wristbands.

The UNMIL radio station broadcasts regular programmes addressing this issue and has developed prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse jingles in a range of community languages. In addition the radio station broadcasts segments that are run 'by children for children', and it hosts monthly sessions by the Conduct and Discipline Team. UNMIL Radio reaches more than 80% of the population, and is frequently noted to be one of the most influential sources of information.

Internal UNMIL communications materials on prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, and on where and how to report, were highly visible throughout the Mission. Examples of good practice include posters, badges, a regular newsletter, and a focus on capacity building and communications so that the rules were fully understood and integrated.

UNMIL has implemented a series of enforcement measures that have contributed to significant improvements in preventing and remedying sexual exploitation and abuse over the past 15 years. Problems persist, however, some of which relate to UNMIL but many of which are as a result of gaps in national laws, rules, policies, measures, and mechanisms. One significant challenge is the time taken by Troop-Contributing Countries to respond to allegations. This suggests that a positive way forward is that support and technical advice should be made available to Troop-Contributing Countries to progress criminal proceedings on SEA

within their domestic jurisdictions. Efforts should be made to promote exchange of information on good practice on tackling SEA of children between TCCs. These measures should be accompanied by monitoring and accountability measures by UNHQ and at the Mission-level.

**The following is a key checklist for appropriate reporting and responding processes:**

- Ensuring that parents, children and relevant others know about child safeguarding commitments and measures. Communications between the organisation and parents/ carers/community leaders should take account of language or communication differences.

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- Devising a complaints procedure with children, families and communities. Make sure it is publicised and that everyone knows about it.

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- Encouraging the involvement of parents/carers/community as much as possible through, for example, membership on committees or steering/planning groups as well as involvement in day-to-day activities.

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- Ensuring records are kept on who has responsibility for the care of a child in any programme or project including their contact details.

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- Ensuring that staff are easily identifiable when at work, for example by wearing a T-shirt or badge.

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- Obtaining parental or primary caregiver consent for children's participation in activities whenever possible.

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- Involving parents, as well as children, in developing codes of good behaviour for staff and for children. For instance if drawing up anti-bullying guidelines.

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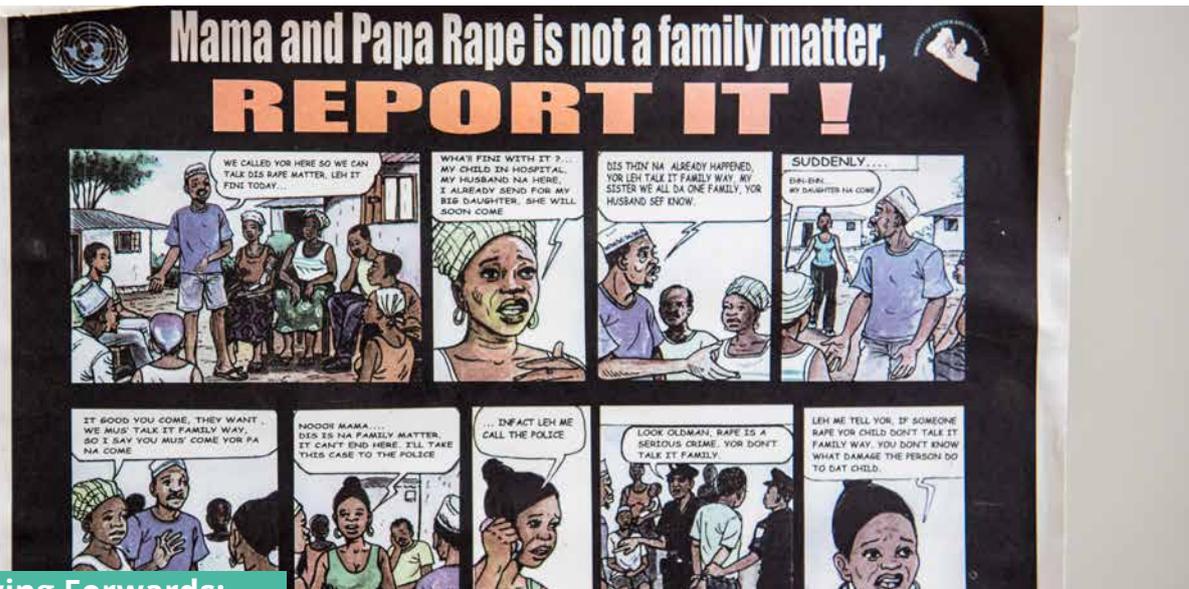
- Devising ways of obtaining feedback from parents/carers/ the community to find out what works, what is not working and to check what people know about the organisation and how it operates.

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- Discussing with children what makes them feel safe and unsafe and agree on ways for children to complain if they have a concern about themselves or their friends.

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- Devising processes for ensuring children are consulted and listened to, to ensure their voices are heard and that their views inform and influence the development of safeguarding.



### Moving Forwards:

### Key Recommendations for the UN

**The research on safeguarding children in Liberia from UN peacekeeper exploitation and abuse demonstrates that where there are widespread problems there are many macro and micro changes that can be implemented effectively to safeguard children from future harm. However, without effective streamlining across the UN, those measures are reliant upon strong leadership from individuals within the peacekeeping operation. Moreover, the effectiveness of those measures frequently depends upon national and international infrastructure for them to be implemented.**

Based upon this research, our main, specifically-implementable recommendations are as follows:

- There is a need to ensure that UNHQ policies and initiatives are taken-up by the senior leadership of all peacekeeping operations. We recommend that UNHQ ensure that anti-sexual exploitation and abuse measures and initiatives are directly emphasised and instructed to senior leadership in UN peacekeeping operations, and that they form part of all job descriptions and appraisals of those personnel.
- There is a need to formalise and standardise all safeguarding processes, including the good practices identified in Liberia alongside those found in other UN peacekeeping operations. This will ensure that all local communities receive the same protection, and that all UN personnel receive the same information and are subject to the same processes.
- There is a need for greater emphasis on and explanation of the needs of children within UN anti-sexual exploitation and abuse initiatives. We recommend that a part of all anti-sexual exploitation and abuse initiatives and measures for UN peacekeeping operations focus on the specific needs of safeguarding children.
- There is a need for specific UN child-safeguarding policy and procedures that addresses the specific needs and vulnerabilities of children in relation to sexual exploitation and abuse, physical or emotional abuse, and other types of harms.

- There is a need to create child safeguarding measures that may be adapted to local contexts, are measurable, and can be implemented and followed-up by UNHQ. We recommend that international and national actors work together to ensure that child safeguarding measures are created and implemented effectively, with consequences for failures to do so.
- There is a need to ensure that UN peacekeeping operations are effectively equipped to vet personnel in relation to child safeguarding. We recommend that UNHQ provide specific measures and support for peacekeeping operations to ensure that international and local personnel have been appropriately vetted prior to employment.
- There is a need for outreach programmes to be in place in all host states where the UN has peacekeeping operations to publicise the existence of the UN's zero tolerance of SEA and encourage people to report cases of abuse. Independent community-based complaint reception mechanisms must be established alongside all peacekeeping missions to provide psychosocial support, counselling and legal advice to the victims of the abuse and ensure that they are aware of their rights to redress. These mechanisms must be capable of reaching even the most isolated communities where peacekeeping troops are deployed.
- There is a need for more research to be carried out on the extent to which communities in which peacekeeping missions are deployed are aware of the UN's 'Zero Tolerance' policy and have access to complaint mechanisms when it is violated.
- There is a need that all outreach programmes are accessible to and appropriate for children. Efforts should be made to communicate to children what they can expect in terms of what is and what is not appropriate behaviour by mission personnel, how to report any abuse and what they can expect in terms of the response and investigation.
- There is a need for victims/survivors to be included at all stages in the process, including through having their voices heard or represented in a meaningful way, and through information about each stage of the process being reported to them in a timely fashion.
- There is a need for good practices to be streamlined across all UN peacekeeping operations rather than remaining ad hoc within each context. We recommend that the good practices from UNMIL and other peacekeeping operations are foregrounded, showcased, and required within all UN peacekeeping operations.



## **Zero Tolerance for Sexual Exploitation and Abuse**

**“Sex with anyone under the age of 18 is prohibited”**

**“Exchanging Money, Goods or Employment for Sex is Prohibited”**

**“Sex with prostitutes is prohibited”**

## IMAGES

### Cover Image

A UN-issued anti-sexual exploitation and abuse badge worn by Dixon Holmes, a UN security officer responsible for staff and visitor safety in the UNMIL headquarters building. These badges are mandatory for all personnel, which also receive sexual exploitation and abuse training when they arrive in the mission, irrespective of their role or whether they have previously received training in their home country. The mandatory training for all staff regardless of status, location, seniority and origin demonstrates the Mission's determination to combat exploitation and abuse. However, some UNMIL staff identified that the training could be improved by being more specific on issues affecting children and through follow-up training at regular intervals. Monrovia, Liberia.

### Page 3

From their studio in UNMIL headquarters, UNMIL Radio is on-air 24/7, reaches over 80% of Liberia's population (more than the BBC) and broadcasts over sixty programmes per week. As with MINUSTAH Radio in Haiti, UNMIL Radio broadcasts special programmes aimed at raising awareness of, and combatting, sexual exploitation and abuse. Programme content is written by UNMIL staff, by local community leaders, and by children themselves. Some of the most successful programmes on sexual exploitation and abuse have been written and produced 'by children, for children'. Programmes frequently include information on how to report cases of abuse. That such radio content is available is crucial for spreading the message about exploitation and abuse, not least because of the high levels of illiteracy throughout the country. Monrovia, Liberia.

### Page 7

Liberia's two civil wars between 1989-1996 and 1999-2003 have devastated most of the country's infrastructure, with bullet-ridden buildings being just one of the daily reminders of conflict. Despite efforts to rebuild the country, which have been assisted considerably since 2003 by the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), Liberia remains one of the least developed countries in the world. The pressures of widespread extreme poverty lead to many parents in rural communities agreeing to their children being taken to Monrovia. Despite promises that the children will receive compensation and education for their work, they end up peddling ice water, snacks, and imported counterfeit goods, often through shack-like storefronts (pictured), meaning that many become trapped in networks of trafficking and abuse from a very young age. Monrovia, Liberia.

### Page 13

The Temple of Justice houses the Supreme Court of Liberia and legal offices. It sits prominently on Capitol Hill in Monrovia, and is surrounded by other important government buildings. The large modern building with its elaborate gold lettering and statues of famous judicial figures stands in stark contrast to the reality faced by those who experience its courtrooms. For many, justice through Liberian courts is elusive. There are high levels of corruption amongst officials, and even where cases do take place many victims and witnesses are financially or physically unable to attend court and therefore cannot participate in proceedings. As a result, less than 1% of those accused of sexual crimes are found guilty in court. One interesting change to the building occurred as part of its renovations in 2008: the word 'MEN' was removed from the building's slogan, such that it now reads: 'LET JUSTICE BE DONE TO ALL'. Monrovia, Liberia.

### Page 20 - 22

In recent years, there have been headquarters-level initiatives to tackle sexual exploitation and abuse, not least those established through the Office of Jane Holl Lute, UN Special Coordinator on improving the United Nations response to sexual exploitation and abuse. During, and even before, those times, certain UN peacekeeping missions created their own mechanisms for addressing widespread abuse on the ground. Chief amongst such missions are UNMIL (Liberia) and MINUSTAH (Haiti), both of which faced repeated exposure of pernicious and widespread sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers. The posters shown, which was produced by UNMIL's Conduct and Discipline Team, details the broader UN policy on zero tolerance of sexual exploitation and abuse, reinforces that sex with anyone under the age of 18 – the age of a child per the UN Convention on the Rights of a Child – is prohibited, and stresses that exploitative behaviour (exchanging money, goods or employment for sex or prostitution) is prohibited when working for the UN, even if local laws (to an extent) permit that behaviour. Monrovia, Liberia.

[www.keepingchildrensafe.org.uk](http://www.keepingchildrensafe.org.uk)

- <https://research.reading.ac.uk/peace-keeper-or-perpetrator/>
- <https://www.un.org/preventing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/>
- <https://www.keepingchildrensafe.org.uk/about-us/news/special-report-urges-international-action-end-abuse-children-context-un-peacekeeping>