



# Who Are the Victims?

Scrutinizing the Discursive Representation of Victims in  
UN Measures Against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by  
Peacekeepers and Personnel

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# Abstract

The purpose of the United Nations (UN) peace operations is to help states navigate a path towards stability and sustainable peace, yet sexual exploitation and abuse perpetrated by the peacekeepers and other personnel is often an unintended consequence of the missions. Though the UN has employed several victim-centred measures to address the issue, peacebuilding practices often employ a simplistic discourse about the victims that recognizes only certain type of ‘ideal’ victims. It risks disregarding the different conceptualisations of justice that victims have, along with their individual wants and needs. Leaning on van Dijk’s view on social power that deems institutions as locations producing dominant discourses and influencing people’s minds, it is crucial to study which discourses the UN engages with. Thus, through a methodological combination of critical discourse analysis and policy analysis, this study scrutinizes the discourses about the victims present in the resolutions and training materials that specifically apply a victim-centred approach. The findings indicate that the discourses entail characteristics of both ideal and complex political victim discourses, and that above all, the UN positions itself as the saviour of the victims. As this discourse is likely to continue reproducing power imbalances that place victims into a dependant position, this study emphasises a serious need for re-evaluation of the UN’s own discursive positioning.

**Keywords:** critical discourse analysis, sexual exploitation and abuse, UN, victim-centred approach, victimhood

Wordcount: 13049

# List of Abbreviations

<b>CDA</b>	Critical Discourse Analysis
<b>MINUSTAH</b>	the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>SEA</b>	Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNMIBH</b>	the UN Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina
<b>UNTAC</b>	the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia
<b>VRA</b>	Victims' Rights Advocate
<b>WHO</b>	the World Health Organization

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# 1 Introduction

Peacekeepers are employed to countries to help “navigate the difficult path from conflict to peace” (United Nations, 2022), yet sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) in peace operations continues to be a pressing issue of concern. Bearing in mind that the statistics may not reflect reality due to a variety of reasons, such as fear of reporting and inadequate access to data, the UN records over 2000 allegations by the UN peacekeepers and other personnel around the world (REDRESS, 2017: 12). Although the gravity of the sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers has been addressed by the UN through an establishment of a zero-tolerance policy, the measures taken have mainly been limited to administrative and disciplinary consequences.

Academic work regarding the matter recognizes problems arising from the role of immunities and the lack of effective prosecution by the Member States (see, for instance, Freedman, 2018; Ferstman, 2020; Odello and Burke, 2016; Sweetser, 2008). One of the main points of complication stems from the fact that the UN does not have a capacity to exercise criminal jurisdiction over its staff, thus the responsibility lies on the states (*ibid.*). However, the allegations rarely lead to legal proceedings, and states seem reluctant to act on the criminal jurisdiction. As sexual exploitation and abuse affect the victims in a plethora of ways – from physical trauma to stigmatisation and isolation – there is a need to establish a sense of justice and accountability. Crucially, academic work has underscored the urgency to shift away from a perpetrator-focused framing, and though limitedly, a victim-centred approach has been employed by the UN through several policies and other measures (Freedman, 2018). Overall analyses on the measures have been scarce and typically focused on the legal possibilities on accountability and justice, and the discourse of them have received little to no attention.

The dominant discourse about victims within peacebuilding measures is recognized by several scholars as a simplistic and narrow one (Christie, 1986; Bouris, 2007; McEvoy and McConnachie, 2012; Walklate, 2007) that risks leaving more complex victims outside the scope of consideration. Therefore, the discourse about victims within the victim-centred measures by the UN emerges as an important area of inquiry. Who exactly are the victims that the UN addresses within its victim-centred measures? Utilizing a combined framework of

critical discourse analysis (CDA) and policy analysis, this study attempts to seek out and scrutinize the discourses about the victims present in the victim-centred measures of UN addressing the SEA by peacekeepers and other personnel. The selected material for this study includes both UN documents, and pieces of training material, all specifically part of the UN's victim-centred approaches.

## 1.1 Aim and Research Question

As discussed above, SEA committed by UN peacekeepers and personnel on peace operations has often been approached through a more perpetrator-centred frame, which has both been insufficient, and more importantly, has disregarded the victims' perspective. Instead of a sole focus on the perpetrators, "the victim must be placed at the centre of those existing processes and frameworks" (Freedman, 2018: 985). However, as different discourses about victims exist, some of them incorporating simplistic and narrow imaginary, a critical point of research emerges to seek out how the victims are constructed discursively in the UN measures. As the UN holds a dominant position in producing human rights discourse (see, for instance, Mutua, 2001), the aim of this thesis is to understand how the victim-centred measures by the UN construct the victims discursively and to scrutinize these discourses. To reach the aim, the following research question has been formulated:

*Which discourses about the victims are present in the victim-centred measures by the UN, dealing with the sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers and other personnel?*

## 1.2 Delimitations

As this study engages with discourses about the victims, specifically within the victim-centred measures by the UN that address the SEA by peacekeepers and other personnel, the scope has been narrowed down to analysing UN material only. The material has been selected from the UN measures that are publicly available, including two resolutions and three pieces of training material, all specifically employing a victim-centred approach – hence, this study will not produce an exhaustive summary of discourses found in all UN documents. More specifically, this study limits the material selection to UN's victim-centred approaches to SEA committed by the peacekeepers and personnel, instead of the victim-centred approaches to



conflict-related SEA generally. This causes certain delimitations, as the study is tied to a very specific context and does not intend to generalize the results.

Though it is important to acknowledge that SEA is not perpetrated by the UN only – reported cases regard the staff of humanitarian aid agencies as well (Ferstman, 2020: 271) – this study specifically limits to analyse the discourses about the victims that the UN produces. Furthermore, while this study makes suggestions to contest certain discourses within these materials, the author has not interviewed or engaged with victims of SEA by the UN personnel and aims not to speak on behalf of the victims. In addition, the study is neither aiming to provide solutions to address SEA from the victim perspective, nor to investigate the underlying causes of SEA. Instead, basing on academic work on the subject, this study scrutinizes the UN's discourses about the victims.

### 1.3 Relevance to Peace and Conflict Studies

Considering which discourses about victims are produced and disseminated within peacebuilding practices holds strong relevance for the field of peace and conflict studies. Not only do the discourses help with victim recognition, but they can also hinder it (Bouris, 2007). In fact, Galtung (1990: 291, 294) recognizes language to be an aspect of cultural violence, conceptualised as the legitimizer of both direct and structural violence. More concretely, he means the symbolic aspects of existence that mask both structural and direct violence into natural parts of life that are internalized – the former referring to exploitation and repression, and the latter meaning the physical aspects of violence (ibid.: 302).

Though Galtung (1990: 299) posits language as an aspect of cultural violence in regard to how certain languages, such as Italian and French, give hierarchy to men over women, language as texts and talk – discourse – can also be seen to possess, reproduce, and legitimate social-power abuse and inequality (van Dijk, 2015: 466). Van Dijk (2015: 469) views that dominant groups have the possibility to exercise power through laws, rules, and norms, thus establishing hegemony. Moreover, he believes that as a result people's minds and attitudes can be influenced and controlled (ibid.: 470), and hence, language and discourse can be viewed as part of cultural violence.

Seeking ways to bring justice to the victims of sexual exploitation and abuse is a central part of peacebuilding, for the lack of focus on victims hinders with reaching sustainable peace in the post-conflict situations. However, as will be developed theoretically further, peacebuilding measures are generally informed by simplistic images and discourses

about victims, and risk leaving more complex victims without justice and healing. As the UN is a dominant producer of human rights discourse, it is then vital to examine the discourse that it produces about victims, for its position as an internationally significant institution gives it access to establish norms and, following van Dijk's view, affect people's minds and attitudes. Moreover, this study contributes to the field of peace and conflict studies by problematizing the ideal victim discourse, and more specifically, scrutinizing the discursive production of victims within the UN measures addressing SEA specifically through a victim-centred approach.

## 1.4 Thesis Outline

This study has been organized into five chapters. Following this introduction chapter, chapter two introduces the theoretical framework, goes through academic work regarding the UN's approach to the SEA by peacekeepers and personnel, and reviews the different discourses about victimhood. Moreover, the chapter gathers an analytical table this study will further utilize in its analysis. Chapter three will present the methodology equipped to answer the research question, discuss the selected material, and offer reflections on the choice of method, ethical considerations, and positionality. In accordance with the analytical and theoretical frameworks, chapter four analyses the discourses about the victims in the selected material and answers the research question. The final chapter summarizes the findings and makes suggestions for future research.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the theoretical framework that this study will incorporate. The first section provides an overview of UN measures addressing sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers and personnel, positioning the study. The following sections present discussions on the discourses about victimhood, leading to the analytical table that comprises of three discourses analysed in this study: ideal political victim, complex political victim, and the UN as the saviour -discourses.

### 2.1 Need for Victim-Centred Measures

Though the UN began to produce annual reports on sexual exploitation and abuse taking place in peace operation only in 2004 (Grady, 2016: 934), the long history of abuse can be first tracked down to the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1993 (Anania, 2022: 895; Westendorf, 2020: 22). Westendorf (ibid.) notes that in 1999, due to the negative media and public attention concerning the SEA that took place in the UN Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina (UNMIBH), the UN changed its approach from brushing the issue off as “boys will be boys” (ibid.: 23) to attempts at policy responses. However, the first efforts fell short in providing protection, one of the reasons being inadequate recognition of victims (ibid.).

The UN zero-tolerance policy, however, emerged later as the response to an independent investigation in 2001 confirming that SEA of local people by the UN staff had taken place in refugee camps in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone (Westendorf, 2020: 23-24). Six basic principles, including the obligation for the UN staff to report misconduct if witnessed, as well as the prohibition of any sexual relationships between staff and beneficiaries of assistance, work as the backbone for the following policies addressing SEA (ST/SGB/2003/13). Harrington (2022: 478) sees that the zero-tolerance slogan masks the UN’s part in responsibility for SEA by situating it in opposition and as ready to punish individual offenders. In a more critical tone, she (ibid.: 471) argues that the policy solutions represent the problem of SEA in relation to the reputational damage it causes to the UN, pointing out that there is institutional resistance to change. Van Boven (2020: 37), in turn, highlights that the approach to reparation of the basic principles is mainly legal and judicial, and understood in monetary terms, and he suggests that other forms of reparative justice – such as symbolic and non-judicial – could benefit victims further.

In their analysis of the UN initiatives addressing SEA, Odello and Burke (2016) conclude that the measures seem inadequate both in providing responses to the victims, and in punishing the perpetrators. They underscore different challenges, such as the reluctance of member states to effectively prosecute perpetrators, the UN's limited capacity to take more than administrative action, as well as the role of immunities (ibid.: 839-842). Odello (2010) links the challenges with accountability to the international responsibility of wrongdoing which root in confusion of definitions of crimes, and in strong ties between the UN and member states in handling the issues. Moreover, Vahedi et al. (2021) deem UN's implemented policies more reactive, for rather than focusing on fundamental causes of the abuses, they tend to address the symptoms of it. The initiatives and policy responses generally, then, seem to pose a multiplicity of weaknesses.

Crucially, in her discussion of reparation for SEA by peacekeepers and humanitarian aid workers, Ferstman (2020: 272) underlines that the recognition of victims' rights to remedy and reparation has received little to no consideration both within policymaking and in academia. Moreover, the three-fold strategy of the UN to address SEA through prevention, enforcement, and remedial action, has initially circled around the perpetrators instead of putting victims at the centre (Freedman, 2018: 964, Sweetser, 2008: 1646). Ferstman makes an important claim by stating that despite "the use of approaches termed as 'victim-centred', there is much vested interest in the status quo which tends to relegate victims to the sidelines – as the passive recipients of aid and assistance" (2020: 274). Indeed, touching upon the position of the victims within her policy analysis, Harrington (2022: 482-483) argues that the UN victim support practices tend to generalize victims discursively. Hence, the need for victim-centred measures becomes complicated, as the initial impression of UN's victim-centred approaches is one that tends to generalize victims into passive recipients of aid.

Also written by Ferstman, the 2017 REDRESS report on SEA by the UN staff investigates what happens to the victims, underscoring that the victims are often overlooked and marginalised in conversations (REDRESS, 2017: 3). More specifically, the report notes that because the UN's understanding of 'victim-centred' as a concept seems to be limited to victim protection and assistance, "the victims are rarely consulted or engaged in the process of finding suitable solutions" (ibid.). This seeming lack of agency is problematic, considering the impact that SEA has on victims, as well as the victims' individual wants and needs. These arguments highlight the need for the UN to put focus on creating measures that ought not to focus on perpetrators as heavily. Moreover, they call for a further investigation of the UN's victim-centred approaches. Though the matter of victims of SEA by UN peacekeepers and

personnel has attracted scholars to study the phenomena, apart from the brief mentions of their discursive representations, the discourses about victims have not received plenty of attention. Thus, this study positions itself to further investigate how victims are constructed discursively within the victim-centred measures.

## 2.2 Discourses About Victims

Thinking of victimology has been an important aspect of both peace and conflict studies and feminist scholarship, though it is primarily known as the key point of study in criminology. While feminist scholars discuss, for instance, the imbalances of power residing in the woman-as-victim discourse (Kapur, 2002; Mohanty, 2003), Bouris (2007: 4-7) underscores that the role of discourse about victims within peacebuilding is integral to make sense of conflicts, to inform the international community, and sometimes to shape policies responding to conflict. The findings of both disciplines are similar: the discourses about victims often rely on simplistic and essentialist images of the victims, producing a plethora of problems. For instance, if the discourse does not consider victims who do not fit the simplistic image of an 'ideal victim', yet it is what primarily shapes the policies crafted in response to conflict, reaching sustainable peace is hindered by inefficient recognition of victims (ibid.).

As Walklate (2007: 26) states, victimology has attracted people from a wide range of disciplines into study, and thus multiple definitions and understandings of the term 'victim' exist. The 1985 United Nations Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power, for instance, defines victims as:

(...) persons who, individually or collectively, have suffered harm, including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, economic loss or substantial impairment of their fundamental rights, through acts or omissions that are in violation of criminal laws operative within Member States, including those laws proscribing criminal abuse of power. (A/RES/40/34)

Importantly, Bouris (2007: 9) emphasises that the status of who is a political victim is not purely legal, but draws from sociopolitical factors, culture, and the victim's own perception. A victim, then, cannot completely be conceptualised through a legal definition. In fact, the ideal political victim – or the deserving victim – is identified by a plethora of scholars as the dominant discourse about victims (Christie, 1986; Bouris, 2007; McEvoy and McConnachie, 2012; Mutua, 2001; Walklate, 2007). Its characteristics can be seen to pour down from the essentialist understanding of woman-as-victim, which is why it is important to discover some of the feminist scholarship on victimhood as the basis. The ideal victim discourse however,

while dominant, is not enough to formulate effective policies, and hence there is an urgent need for more nuanced victim discourses (Bouris, 2007: 7). Therefore, Bouris' aim to widen the discourses of victims by theorising a complex political victim (ibid.: 28) becomes suitable to counteract the dominant discourse of the ideal victim.

### 2.2.1 Woman-as-Victim

Raghavan (2023: 2) investigates the victim/agent binary of the subject of sexual violence, stating that women are often imagined either as “vulnerable victims in need of protection, or as capable (...) agents, but never simultaneously both”. Similarly, Mohanty (2003: 22-23) notices that women are often bound together discursively by a shared notion of oppression, marking them as a group that is labelled both powerless and exploited. She warns that defining women as “archetypal victims freezes them into ‘objects-who-defend-themselves’” (ibid.: 24), fixing women's identities to victimhood, and therefore to passivity and lack of agency (Raghavan, 2023: 3). She finds that growingly, victimhood is associated with gendered traits of passivity, helplessness, and weakness (ibid.: 10).

Moreover, power imbalances underpin the feminist discourses about victimhood. For instance, there is a tendency within mainstream white feminism to monopolise victimhood and secure the privileges of bourgeois white women (Phipps, 2020 in Raghavan, 2023: 10). In fact, Kapur (2002: 6) underscores that the construction of the victim subject is based on both gender and cultural essentialism – and more specifically, hegemonic generalizations, representing the problems of privileged women. This becomes especially problematic because it portrays “women in the Third World (...) as victims of their culture” (ibid.). Similarly, Mohanty (2003: 22) argues that the Western feminist scholarship often constructs an image of a singular Third World woman through essentializing discourses: “being Third World”, which signifies ignorant, poor, or victimized, and female, reading as “sexually constrained”. Thus, within the discourses about victimhood, women are simultaneously tied to essentialized, generalizing imaginary, yet on different hierarchical levels.

Such discourses are not limited to academia only. Nylund, Håkansson, and Bjarnegård (2023) investigate to what extent gender essentialist and postcolonial discourse is reproduced in Sweden's feminist foreign policy, noticing, for instance, a repeated creation of a binary that places women into the role of passive victims and men to the role of perpetrators of violence (ibid.: 266-267). Similarly, Puechguirbal (2010: 173) notices that in UN

documents, women are primarily represented through a narrow and essentializing lens. Building on previous research, she further argues that the discourse positions women as “helpless victims” (ibid.: 175-176, 184), often defined as mothers and mentioned in association with children. While Nylund, Håkansson, and Bjarnegård (2023) deem that the discourse in Sweden’s feminist foreign policy is not purely essentializing, but has transformative potential due its commitment to intersectionality, Puechguirbal (2010: 184) concludes that the essentialist representation of women is deeply ingrained in UN documents. Clearly, the essentializing discourses both about women and victimhood are not exempt from policy documents, even from the UN.

### 2.2.2 Ideal Political Victim

Understanding that the ideal political victim discourse is partially rooted in the essentialist representation of women-as-victims, it can be seen to entail certain characteristics, such as innocence, lack of responsibility, purity, and moral superiority, through which the ideal political victim is recognized as a ‘real victim’ who is not responsible for their victimization (Bouris, 2007: 32, 39, 45). Bouris establishes that the ideal political victim discourse locates both in interest-based and rights-based approaches to peacebuilding, both assuming that the status of a victim is uncontested, given, and most often presented in contrast to the perpetrator (2007: 23, 26).

Key characteristic of the ideal victim discourse is the innocence of the victim (Bouris, 2007: 26; Mutua, 2001: 230). It is often used to signify either the noncombatant status of the victimized, or to suggest the absence of wrongdoing, framing the activities and identity of the victim as normal and acceptable (Bouris, 2007: 36-37). Within the rights-based approach it works in contrast to the “evil perpetrator” (ibid.: 26-27, 37; Mutua, 2001: 230), positioning the perpetrator as morally evil and the victim as morally good. Bouris (2007: 26) recognizes that children, women, and mothers specifically form the image of an innocent victim that organizations using a rights-based strategy, such as the UN or Amnesty, often engage with, echoing Puechguirbal’s (2010: 184) findings on how women specifically are posited as helpless victims this way. Thus, in accordance with the dominant discourse, innocence seems to be the most fundamental requirement to be recognized as a ‘real victim’, best represented by images of children and women.

Tied closely to innocence, purity emerges as another characteristic of the ideal political victim (Bouris, 2007: 40). It works in juxtaposition to the aggressive perpetrator,

who has attacked a helpless victim. For instance, Randall (2010: 407) notes that the image of an ideal victim, who is embedded within stereotypes of purity and passivity, continues to be prevalent in discrediting the experiences of women who do not fit the image of a “real” sexual assault victim. Furthermore, the victims who do not fit the image of an ideal victim may, consequently, be seen at fault for what happened to them, and not worthy of criminal justice intervention (ibid.: 408-409). Indeed, Bouris (2007: 44-5) names the lack of responsibility as another characteristic of an ideal victim, indicating that the victim is not responsible for their victimization. Linking these characteristics tightly to the ideal victim, then, shapes the understanding of who is a ‘real victim’ and creates a narrow framing that risks leaving out others not recognized by this discourse (ibid.: 40-41).

The combination of innocence and purity of an ideal victim produces moral superiority as the last characteristic that Bouris defines (2007: 42). According to her, the innocence suggests a non-combatant status of the victim, who due to their purity would only engage in violence as a self-defence (ibid.: 43). Ultimately, the “extreme suffering” (ibid.) is seen to contribute to the moral development of the victim. This discursive characteristic serves two purposes. First, scholars have noted it to be crucial for the victim’s own healing (ibid.), by establishing a clear distinction between the good victim and evil perpetrator, further leaning on the binary. The sense of moral superiority may be critical to protect the perception the victim has of themselves, as well as of humanity.

The ideal political victim discourse, as described above, serves an instrumental purpose within peacebuilding by aiding victim recognition (Bouris, 2007: 52). Oversimplifying the image and enforcing the cut between the perpetrator and the victim may be also done due to practical considerations, such making policy (ibid.: 49), or to evoke sympathy and mobilize public outrage (Mutua, 2001: 230). The use of the discourse does not bear negative consequences only, then. However, it carries the risk of failing to adequately address the complexity of the victimization (Bouris, 2007: 50) – if only a limited number of people who fit the discourse are considered in peacebuilding measures, such as policy responses, the path towards long-term peace may be disrupted. Though upkeeping the discourse seems to have positive aims, such as avoiding victim blaming (ibid.) by referring to the victim’s lack of responsibility and prosecuting the perpetrators by invoking the binary of a morally good victim and evil perpetrator, the danger lies in leaving a more complex victim without healing and justice.



### 2.2.3 Complex Political Victim and Victim Perspective

As established, relying too heavily on the dominant discourse of an ideal political victim becomes problematic in several ways within peacebuilding measures, such as policymaking, by catering only to a certain type of a victim. Bouris (2007: 75-80) emphasises the urgency to challenge the essentialist discourse and to realise that the identity of the victim is not as fixed nor singular as the dominant discourse seems to suggest, and thus, she introduces the discourse of a complex political victim. For her, the complexity of the political victim means the agency and the ways “in which she engages and is constituted by a particular discourse” (ibid.: 82). Hence, Bouris sees that the victim is not helpless and passive, but capable of shaping and engaging with the discourses about them and is simultaneously shaped by this process (ibid.). Though applying such a discourse is not effortless due to the strong establishment of the ideal victim and the reliance on the victim-perpetrator binary, Bouris (2007: 121) finds that there is a space to challenge the dominant perspective.

In her further exploration of the agency of a complex political victim, Bouris (2007: 123-124) argues that even within the dominant discourse the victims can challenge the ‘given’ identities and articulate alternatives. She sees it as a personal process in which the victim should be able to engage in practices to challenge the victimization instead of being dependent on the recognition by international institutions and community (2007: 125). While in part the agency will be examined further within the analysis as the study looks at the actors behind certain policies, in order to adopt the concept of a complex political victim adequately into the analysis of this study, it is necessary to explore the victims’ perspectives further. As the discourses of and by the victims of SEA by UN personnel are scarcely studied, this study looks at the information available in combination with interviews conducted with victims of sexual abuse on their conceptualisations on justice in two different studies (Clark, 2015; McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019).

Though unlikely to take place in conventional justice processes, McGlynn and Westmarland (2019: 180) emphasise that reaching justice occurs only once the way “how victim survivors themselves conceptualise justice” is considered. The participants in both studies raise validation and perpetrator accountability as some of the main themes concerning justice (Clark, 2015: 23-25; McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019: 187-188). Gaining validity through an official acknowledgement of the crime’s impact on the individual’s life may hold significance to the victim, while, undoubtedly, being discredited or feeling judged bears negative consequences (Clark, 2015: 23-25). Importantly, validity encompasses receiving not

only a recognition of the victim's experience, but a recognition of the person themselves, and McGlynn and Westmarland (2015: 189) call this recognition central to the survivor's sense of justice. Accountability, on the other hand, concerns the responsibility of perpetrators – though not necessarily meaning punishment, specific actions ought to happen for the harm they have caused (ibid.: 186). The participants in Clark's (2015: 25-26) study made notice that the system, even when finding the perpetrator guilty, did not force them to take responsibility for their behaviour, lacking an acknowledgment of the full scope of the crimes. Establishing accountability, then, is vital – and more specifically, the acknowledgment that the process means different things to different victims.

In their investigation of abuse committed by workers of the World Health Organization (WHO) during the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mukundi and Flummerfelt (2023) report in accordance with the victim statements on the inadequate and slow assistance legally, as well as in providing mental health support and compensation. Additionally, they discovered that “no UN personnel have been referred for potential prosecution” (ibid.). As another source of victim perspectives, Lee and Bartels (2020) map out the local narratives about children fathered by UN personnel who are born to women and girls as the result of the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH). Some of the women interviewed note on their frustration “about carrying sole responsibility for the child without support from various stakeholders” (ibid.: 191). Following validity and accountability as the notions of justice for victims of sexual abuse, the interviews appear to echo the same concerns. Slow response times, deficient compensation, and lack of support hint at a shortcoming of providing a sense of validity to the victims. Accountability of the perpetrators seems to go together with validity, as the women's experiences discussed above reflect on the frustration caused by the lack of support by UN personnel fathering their children.

Acknowledging, however, that the victims of SEA by UN personnel are not a homogenous group, but individuals with unique backgrounds, wants, needs, and experiences is extremely vital. Further research into the victims' perspectives is critical to widen the understanding of the multiplicity of the narratives. Moreover, the people interviewed for the studies by Clark (2015), and McGlynn and Westmarland (2019) are not situated within conflicts, and though the participants differ in age, they are predominantly female and white – emphasizing how future research needs to consider victims of different backgrounds even more. Recognizing these limitations, this study will incorporate validation and accountability

regarding victims into the victim perspective through which the discourses within the material will be analysed, while considering that they do not represent all victims.

## 2.3 Victims, Perpetrators, and Saviours

As discussed during the exploration of an ideal political victim discourse, the experience and politics of victimhood are tightly bound and understood in terms of its relationship to the perpetrators of crime, especially prevalent within victimology scholarship and policy (McEvoy, McConnachie, 2012: 531). Mutua (2001: 202) describes this a “black-and-white construction that pits good against evil”, and names the United Nations as one of the main locations producing such human rights discourse. Interestingly, in addition to victims and perpetrators, he calls attention to a third actor – namely, the saviour – whose purpose is to protect, vindicate, and redeem (ibid.: 204). In human rights discourse the UN posits itself as the saviour who is capable of rescuing and safeguarding the rights of victims (ibid.: 206), creating an interesting paradox in this study as the UN is located as both the saviour and perpetrator within this paradigm. Harrington’s (2022: 482) study on how SEA is problematized in UN policies finds similarly that the UN often poses itself as the solution to the problem. Therefore, ‘UN as the saviour’ is drawn out as another dominant discourse that runs parallel to the victim discourses.

Furthermore, Mutua argues that the UN’s own positioning as the saviour is underpinned by “fictions of neutrality and universality” (2001: 206). Similar to the power imbalances that Mohanty (2003) identifies within Western feminist scholarship, Mutua makes note that the UN’s human rights discourse is deeply engrained in Eurocentrism (ibid.: 207). Studies by Briant Carant (2017), and Cummings et al. (2018) on the discourses within Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) illustrate this well. Through conducting a critical discourse analysis, Cummings et al. (2018), for instance, look at how knowledge is perceived in the SDGs. Their main critique regards the discourse’s lack of focus on local knowledge, and consequently, on the consideration of local realities (ibid.: 738-739). Moreover, their findings assert that the UN’s ignorance of local knowledge and development “undermines the transformative agenda” (ibid.). Briant Carant’s study reaffirms that the goals “remain steeped in power-laden hegemonic frameworks” (2017: 34), revealing an uneven representation of the global population. This study, then, embarks to see how prevalent this positioning is in the discourses about victims, specifically within the victim-centred measures by the UN.

## 2.4 Analytical Table

Drawing from the above discussion on discourses about the victims, three discourses have been identified: ideal political victim, complex political victim, and UN as the saviour - discourses. Three categories help understand the differences between ideal and complex political victim discourses, divided into characteristics, wants and needs, and agency, guiding the analysis of the selected material. In addition to the mapping of the two discourses about the victims, the positionality of the UN will be inspected in relation to them via the discourse ‘UN as the Saviour’.

TABLE 1. *Mapping of the discourses*

Discourse	Ideal Political Victim	Complex Political Victim	UN as the Saviour
Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Innocence</li> <li>- Purity</li> <li>- Lack of responsibility</li> <li>- Moral superiority</li> <li>- Part of victim-perpetrator binary</li> <li>- Homogenous group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Non-essentializing features</li> <li>- Heterogenous group of individuals</li> </ul>	Part of the victim-perpetrator-saviour-paradigm
Wants and Needs	Non-specified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Validation via official recognition</li> <li>- Accountability of perpetrators</li> </ul>	Redeem and protect the rights of victims
Agency	Passive	Engaged	

## 3 Methodology

This chapter introduces the use of critical discourse analysis in the context of policy and document analysis as the method of choice for this study. Having presented the analytical framework, this chapter reflects on the choice of method and discusses the selected material. Furthermore, in the light of reliability and validity, ethical considerations and the positionality of the author will be reflected upon.

### 3.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

For this study aims for an in-depth analysis of the meanings implied in the selected material, a qualitative research design is employed (Chambliss and Schutt, 2013: 208). The qualitative design is especially suitable for this study, for it allows the author to work closely with the material with specific sensitivity to context, rather than attempting to make broad generalizations (ibid.). Moreover, critical discourse analysis is equipped, as this study is concerned not only with teasing out the discourses about the victims present in the UN measures but also with illuminating the power imbalances underlining them. Gee (2014: 9) argues that discourse analysis – and CDA specifically – is appropriate for carrying this type of research. Critique of the critical approach regards its so-called “unscientific” nature, as some believe the analyst to be biased due to their interest in intervening with a social problem (ibid.) – this, however, will be covered through a later reflection of positionality. Other critique surrounding CDA concerns the broad and varied understandings of discourse (Bryman, 2018: 536), hence the study conceptualises *discourse* as “the ways in which sentences connect and relate to each other across time in speech or writing” (Gee, 2014: 18). Furthermore, the study adopts the view that the social reality is produced through discourses, thus social interactions cannot be separated from discourses as they give them meaning.

Following van Dijk’s (2015: 466-467) conceptualisation of critical research on discourse, CDA is not a method per se, but an analytical practice that focuses on the ways discourse structures reproduce, legitimate or challenge relations of power abuse in society. Specific to CDA, social problems and political issues are at the core of the study, and the aim is to explain rather than merely describe them (ibid.). Moreover, the social power of groups and institutions – specifically, their ability to control the “acts and minds” (ibid.: 469) of other groups – is another central area of CDA. A dominant group or institution’s power may take the form of laws, norms, and general consensus (ibid.), shaping the way people view the

world. Following Mutua's (2001) statement of the UN as one of the main actors producing the human rights discourse, this makes CDA particularly fitting for this study, as the focus is on the discourse embedded in the UN's measures.

As established, CDA offers a fruitful angle to analyse knowledge as a social product, allowing for a close investigation of power relations present in discourse. Seeing that it does not have a clear-cut theoretical framework (van Dijk, 2015: 468), Cummings, de Haan and Seferiadis (2020) take it a step further by constructing a methodological framework well-suited to analyse policy documents, for they argue that CDA is often not described in clear steps and has been more applied to academic data. Through their framework, a social issue may be either addressed or explored, and as a result, inner biases and claims of the documents are discovered in a structured manner (ibid.: 100). Another benefit of their framework is the activist nature of it, for the final stage of the framework provides a space for the researcher to identify new discourses, narratives, and arguments to counteract the dominant discourse (ibid.).

As policies are not formed by chance, but are instead products "formed, disseminated and legitimised within complex chains and networks of events" (Fairclough, 2013: 244-245 in Cummings, de Haan and Seferiadis, 2020: 101), the use of CDA for the purposes of this study becomes ideal. More specifically, CDA in combination with policy analysis helps this study to seek out which discourses are produced by the selected UN material, as well as allows them to be contested.

## 3.2 Analytical Framework

The framework by Cummings, de Haan, and Seferiadis (2020) has four phases, which this study will engage with:

### *Phase 1: Selection of research topic and providing an overview of past discourses*

The first phase has two steps and sets the stage for the whole study (Cummings, de Haan and Seferiadis, 2020: 103-104). Identifying which discourses about the victims are present in the victim-centred measures of the UN addressing SEA, and scrutinizing these discourses, has been selected as the research topic of this study. The previous section, theoretical framework, provides an overview of the discourses present in the area of investigation – victimhood – and has provided two dominant discourses: namely, ideal political victim, and UN as the saviour - discourses. Thus, phase one has been completed.

### *Phase 2: Selection and analysis of texts*

The second phase is a three-step process that begins with a selection of texts appropriate to the research question. The material selected for this study are two UN resolutions, and three pieces of training material, all specifically part of the UN's victim-centred approach. In the following two steps, the selected material is analysed at the level of individual words and phrases, how they relate to each other, and looking at the priority given to different themes, eventually leading to an identification of the discourses based on the previous findings (Cummings, de Haan, and Seferiadis 2020: 104). These steps will take place in the following chapter – analysis – with the help of the analytical table, laid out in Table 1.

### *Phase 3: Describe how the text was created and how this potentially relates to the discourses identified*

Not a typical part of CDA, this phase is a unique addition by Cummings, de Haan and Seferiadis (2020: 105). As it considers which actors were involved in developing policy, and how it relates to the discourses, it is greatly relevant for this study. For the aim is to identify and analyse the discursive construction of victims within the victim-centred measures, it is beneficial to understand who has had a role in creating the discourses, also contributing to understanding the possible power imbalances. This phase will have its own section in the analysis.

### *Phase 4: Possible solution and ways past the dominant discourse*

Located within the next chapter as well, the final phase investigates how the dominant discourses could be contested (Cummings, de Haan and Seferiadis 2020: 101). It allows the researcher to take a more activist position to possibly challenge and further identify the implications of the dominant discourses, complementing the research aim of this study. In the context of this study, then, the researcher will investigate whether the contesting discourse, complex political victim, has space within the victim-centred measures. Additionally, the positionality of the UN will be scrutinized.

## 3.3 Reflection on the Choice of Method

Utilizing a combined framework of critical discourse analysis and policy analysis has been carefully chosen to best complement the aim of this study: identifying and scrutinizing the

discourses about victims that are present in the victim-centred UN measures addressing SEA. The critical, activist nature of the combined method is its main strength, allowing the author to make suggestions to move past the dominant discourses. Importantly, the author has considered other methods throughout the research process, such as Bacchi's (Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016: 14) "What's the Problem Represented to be?" approach, concerned with how governmental practices produce problems "as particular kinds of problems", as well as particular subjects, objects, and places. While the approach shares similarities with CDA in that it sees that things are not natural, and invites the analysis of authority and power, it strays away from giving recommendations on ways past the problematizations (ibid.: 24-25).

Another method the author has considered throughout the process has been a qualitative content analysis, comprising of a search of underlying themes analysed within the selected material (Bryman, 2018: 557). The themes are sought out and extracted from the data, and the focus is on studying meanings in depth and detail (Chambliss and Schutt, 2013: 209), yet as CDA is specifically concerned with the power imbalances underpinning the meanings, it serves as a better research tool for the purposes of this study.

### 3.4 Material Selection and Source Discussion

Critical discourse analysis as a research tool allows the author to choose objects of analysis that can be both verbal and visual, received via reading, listening, or viewing (Janks, 1997: 329), thus, opening a wide range of material to choose from. The selected material for this study limits to five pieces of primary sources, all chosen from the UN's publicly available data base. More specifically, the materials are part of the UN's specific victim-centred measures to address SEA by peacekeepers and personnel – different from the similar approaches to conflict-related SEA generally – and have been limited to best represent the variety of the material. The selected material, then, includes two documents, and three pieces of training material from the UN's victim-centred training module.

Two documents by the UN General Assembly are selected, with the *United Nations Comprehensive Strategy on Assistance and Support to Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by United Nations Staff and Related Personnel* – the Comprehensive Strategy in short – starting off the analysis. Adopted in 2008, after the implementation of a zero-tolerance policy towards SEA, it sets forward a victim-centred focus in approaching the issue (A/RES/62/214, 2008). The second document from 2017 is a report by the Secretary-General, and it establishes a strategy to improve the UN's victim-centred approach towards preventing and



responding to SEA (A/71/818, 2017), titled as *Special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse: a new approach*. The report includes a thorough list of different measures in both prevention and response to SEA, and it comprises of four main areas of action: putting victims first; ending impunity; engaging civil society and external partners; and improving strategic communications for education and transparency.

As one of the results from the four-part strategy, the UN has published a website providing information specifically on the victim-centred measures it has implemented, titled *Victim's Rights First*. The website provides an open access to different materials, including a training module for all UN staff and related personnel, that aims to provide “a clear understanding of the rights of victims of sexual harassment and sexual exploitation and abuse, and what a victim-centred approach means in practice” (United Nations, n.d.). The module is described as “a broad framework” (United Nations, 2021b: 2) to have either as a stand-alone training, or to integrate into existing ones. Included in the training material is a video, titled *I have the right*, meant to represent the victims’ perspective, and as that is part of forming the discourses about the victims, it has been chosen as part of the material for this study.

The final pieces of material for this study is also selected from the training materials, developed in 2021: *Facilitator notes*. They consist of the information that the host of a training session ought to go through with the participants, including definitions of SEA, overview of standards, policies and the core principles of the UN, finally leading up to the example *Case studies* to practice applying victims’ rights concretely. As all UN staff and related personnel must go through the training, the discourse embedded in them is part of setting the tone for the whole organization, which is why the *Facilitator notes* and *Case studies* have been selected as the final pieces of material for this study.

The main benefit of these primary sources is the direct relevance for the aim of the study – identifying and scrutinizing the discourses present in the victim-centred UN measures. Important to consider, however, is also that the material has been constructed with distinctive purposes in mind, and may not simply be reflecting reality (Bryman, 2018: 555), hence the author has attempted to choose not only resolutions, but training material also. While there could be other victim-centred measures that the UN employs, which are not available to the public, the material has been selected from the UN’s publicly available sources and seen to best represent the variety of the measures in accordance with the author’s knowledge.

### 3.5 Ethical Considerations and Positionality

For the author will not conduct interviews or collect primary data on site, the ethical considerations of this study mainly regard ensuring academic integrity (Chambliss and Schutt, 2013: 231). Since describing methods in an open and detailed manner is key for achieving this (ibid.), the author has sought to be as transparent and clear of the steps taken as possible. Alongside ensuring academic integrity, a reflection of the positionality of the author is part of establishing both validity and reliability of the study (Chambliss and Schutt, 2013: 53; Noble and Smith, 2015: 34). Although, as the author, I have attempted to approach this research objectively, it is vital to acknowledge that I come from Finland and have mainly been surrounded by Western knowledge that has inevitably shaped my understanding of the world.

To strive away from essentialist understandings that underpin Western scholarship (Mohanty, 2003), I have aimed to incorporate non-Western lenses to view the material with. However, it is of utmost importance to emphasize that often-times reports, academic journals and funding proposals end up “re-presenting” or speaking “for victims”, which Kennedy (2002: 121 in Madlingozi, 2010: 208, 210) calls “an inherently voyeuristic or pornographic practice”. Similarly, postcolonial scholars, such as Spivak, highlight that language and writing, specifically on the Third World, reproduces “various forms of Western hegemonic power” (Kapoor, 2004: 628), calling for critical reflections on the authors’ positioning. Hence, because the author is not a neutral agent, my background has unavoidably affected the construction of this study. In addition to acknowledging my bias and approaching the subject sensitively, I have been in dialogue with my supervisor and peers throughout the writing process, aiming for a constant reflection of my own perspectives, together with an establishment of trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004: 67).

## 4 Analysis

Applying both the analytical and theoretical frameworks, this chapter explores the selected material accordingly. The first section teases out and defines the discourses present in the material. Then, the background factors of the material are mapped out, leading to a discussion to both understand and contest the dominant discourses. Finally, the research question is answered in the concluding remarks.

### 4.1 Who Are the Victims?

As Table 1 illustrates, certain elements – characteristics, wants and needs, and the question of agency – indicate the presence of the identified discourses. Contrastingly to the ideal political victim discourse, which is underpinned by the characteristics of innocence, purity and lack of agency, the countering – complex political victim – discourse recognizes that victims are a heterogenous group of individuals who instead of passivity are engaged, with unique wants and needs. More specifically, validity and accountability have been chosen as the examples for this study. Therefore, the analysis inspects whether the material describes victims in accordance with the ideal political victim discourse, hence, in an essentializing way that deems them as passive recipients of assistance, or whether the discourse could lean towards incorporating a complex political victim discourse. Parallel to both victim discourses, the position of the UN as the saviour discourse will be scrutinized – whether the UN’s discursive position is as the redeemer of rights and dignity of the victims.

#### 4.1.1 Res 62/214 and Report of the Secretary-General

For the documents A/RES/62/214 and A/71/818 set the stage for the UN’s victim-centred approaches regarding SEA, the analysis begins with them. The former resolution, titled the *United Nations Comprehensive Strategy on Assistance and Support to Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by United Nations Staff and Related Personnel*, is a four-page document laying out the base for the UN’s further strategies to “provide assistance and support to victims” (A/RES/62/214, 2008). In this document, victims are defined as:

Persons whose claims that they have been sexually exploited or abused by United Nations staff or related personnel have been established through a United Nations administrative process or Member States’ processes, as appropriate. (A/RES/62/214, 2008)

Though the document gives no further specification on the characteristics of victims, it does make a differentiation between victims, complainants – persons who allege they have been sexually exploited or abused – and children born as a result of the exploitation and abuse. Moreover, while the document emphasises that support and assistance should be given to both victims and complainants in accordance with their individual needs, it does not make further distinctions about the victims regarding their gender or background, though SEA is a “gendered phenomenon, which disproportionately affects women and girls” (Ferstman, 2020: 275). As the 2017 REDRESS report puts it, “precisely who is a victim remains unclear” in this document (REDRESS, 2017: 9).

Contrastingly, the report of the Secretary-General A/71/818, titled *Special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse: a new approach*, which was adopted ten years after the former resolution, acknowledges early on the gender disparity by stating that “nearly all victims (...) are women and girls” (A/71/818, 2017). While the initial impression given is that the later document notices the heterogeneity of victims better than the first one, both do acknowledge that assistance must be given to victims “in accordance with their individual needs” (A/RES/62/214, 2008: 3; A/71/818, 2017: 4). Though this is not elaborated in much detail, it suggests, at least in part, an acknowledgment of individuality of the victims in accordance with the complex political victim discourse.

Furthermore, as a piece of a four-part strategy to address SEA, the report of the Secretary-General exclaims that the UN will “elevate the voice of victims themselves and put their rights and dignity at the forefront of our efforts” (A/71/818, 2017: 6). It suggests a greater agency of the victims, yet in the following sentence the direction shifts to leaning on the support of external experts and organizations to take the causes of victims from allegations to judgements, and to improve the assistance given to victims (ibid.). Section three claiming that the rights and dignity of victims should be placed first, underlines further that support given to the victims is the priority, and notes that:

We must seek to restore our personal connections with and empathy towards victims of these heinous crimes in meaningful ways and give visibility to those who have suffered the most. I intend to provide victims a platform for their voice that the world will not be able to ignore. (...) I will let these survivors know that their protection is our priority and that going forward, the United Nations will be at their side to support them as they go through the healing process and rebuild their lives. (A/71/818, 2017: 8)

The above quote seems to incorporate both two dominant discourses identified in this study. By describing the victims in relation to “heinous crimes” and aiming to give visibility to “those who have suffered the most”, the discourse evidently poses victims as an innocent,

helpless entity that the UN can grant a voice and platform to. Interestingly, the victims are not posed in opposition to the perpetrators but as victims of the crimes, with the UN “at their side to support them”. The only nod at the complex political victim discourse is the establishment of validation by the UN of the gravity of the crimes, especially as the initiative is mentioned again in the summary of actions and recommendations (ibid.: 21), proposing that the Secretary-General aims to meet and hear from the victims directly.

While it is unspecified what this proposal would lead to, or what a platform for victims’ voice would entail, establishing a new position – the Victims’ Rights Advocate (VRA) – seems to be the pathway between the UN and the victims (ibid.: 9). The tasks of the VRA include ensuring that victims receive assistance in a timely manner, as well as making sure that gender-sensitive pathways exist for reporting cases (ibid.). The first VRA, Jane Connors (2019: 504), reflects on how her interactions with victims provided her with information on their needs and concerns, as well as on the meaning of justice and accountability. Furthermore, she states that “giving visibility and a voice to victims quickly emerged as the priority” (ibid.: 504). While the aim of this position is to facilitate effective assistance and support to the victims, simultaneously it appears to group all victims together by assigning a UN staff member to represent the rights and voice of the victims. Though unclear whether the report by the Secretary-General aims the VRA to be the platform for victims’ voice it refers to, Connors’ reflection together with the document indicates that way. Seemingly, there is a desire by the UN to use discourse that would encompass victim agency, but the victims’ agency seems to be continuously described to be fulfilled through the UN’s representation. The UN as a saviour discourse, then, seems to be very strong.

Ensuring accountability of perpetrators rises as one of the main themes of the later report, tied strongly with putting victims’ rights first (A/71/818, 2017: 21, 26, 34). More specifically, the focus is on individual, criminal accountability (ibid.). While accountability is one of the notions of justice that victims refer to as necessary, as discovered earlier, the conceptualisations of it still vary depending on the person. Considering this, the sole focus on criminal accountability is not satisfactory in considering the variety of wants and needs of victims. The report, however, notices that enhancing the accountability will serve “as an important symbolic act of addressing harm done to victims” (A/71/818, 2017: 34), acknowledging the role of validity towards victims. The former resolution, on the other hand, states explicitly as its last point that:

The provision of any assistance and support by the United Nations in every case of complainants, victims and children born as a result of sexual exploitation and abuse is

not an acknowledgement of the validity of the claims or an indication of acceptance of responsibility by the alleged perpetrator. (A/RES/62/214, 2008: 4)

Once again, the discourse of the later report has elements of the complex political victim discourse in its consciousness of the relevance of validity and accountability. Yet, the mere focus on criminal accountability narrows it down and leaves no room for wider conceptualisations. Additionally, the criminal accountability regards individuals as perpetrators, and while a perpetrator-victim binary is not specifically invoked, the focus on individuals seems to be a way to distance the UN as the perpetrator position, perhaps to ensure its saviour position.

#### 4.1.2 UN Training Material

While the main focus of the resolutions is to map out a system-wide, general strategy to address SEA and to introduce the victim-centred approach, the training module crafted for all staff and personnel puts emphasis on how to respect the rights victims have in practice. It first aims to show a victim perspective through an introduction video, titled *I have the right* (United Nations, 2021a). The video begins with actors representing victims, establishing that they have the right “to be treated with dignity and respect” (ibid., 00:09), with a tagline telling the viewer what the victim has been through: harassment by a colleague, rape by a UN humanitarian worker, or an exploitative relationship with a UN partner. The narrative changes in the middle of the video from exclaiming the rights, to the ‘victims’ stating that to fulfil the rights, they “also need assistance and support to restore [their] dignity” (ibid.: 01:17). The discourse follows fully the UN as the saviour discourse, framing the UN as the body who can restore the dignity of the victims and put their rights first, and it also positions the victims in need of the UN’s help.

The discourse about the victims in the video does not directly follow the dominant discourse as it does not invoke entirely essentialist features. Though it portrays children, as well as a child with her mother – who are often linked with imaginary of innocence and purity – the video seems to widen the image of who could be a victim by involving children, adults, men, and women, as well as people from different ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, one of the perspectives presented in the video is victim agency, through the statement “I have the right to decide if I want to be part of any investigation” (ibid.: 00:45), though otherwise the victims are presented as innocent, helpless, and in need of assistance. The video appears to showcase a variety of victim perspectives, but at the same time it represents victims on behalf of them.

It echoes the discourse of the report by Secretary-General in its purpose to act as the voice and representation for victims, without a mention of an attempt to build the representation in cooperation with them. Thus, the discourse about the victims appears to mark them as a group who is mostly passive, though not homogenous in their characteristics and needs.

The *Facilitator notes* from 2021, including the information all participants of the training module ought to obtain, has its core focus on teaching about victims' rights and how to uphold them. The victims are first mentioned in relation to the variety of consequences they suffer due to SEA, also acknowledging that "victims often face systemic and structural barriers in their lives" (United Nations, 2021b: 6) including stereotypes, stigma, and sex and gender-based discrimination. Specifically, the document mentions how women, LGBTQI+ and SOGIESC (sexual orientation or gender identities and expressions or sexual characteristics) individuals are often more vulnerable (ibid.). Moreover, the document makes a specification on the use of the term 'victim' instead of 'survivor' to match the terminology in the UN human rights and other documents (ibid.: 8). It underlines that people may prefer one over the other and that should be respected, and that the term victim should not be considered in a negative manner (ibid.). The document describes victims further in the following way:

Victims are generally members of a local and/or displaced population in situations of vulnerability. They may be internally displaced persons or refugees or members of the local population who are seeking or are beneficiaries of assistance or persons of concern. Victims are not limited to beneficiaries of assistance and may include individuals who are in close proximity to, or interact with, United Nations staff and non-staff personnel. Victims may also be UN personnel and personnel of partner agencies. (...) While the majority of victims is women and girls, men and boys can be victims. (United Nations, 2021b: 10)

The above quote illustrates well the neutral tone that the *Facilitator notes* uses in talking about the victims. Evidently, there is a wish to not make claims of any one type of victim, but an assertion of how individuals who are victims are varied. What the document notes is also that the victims of SEA by UN personnel may be staff members themselves – importantly, in this regard, the UN as the saviour discourse is not blinding the victim recognition but could even be seen to widen it. The characteristics of the ideal political victim discourse seem not to be embedded within the discourses for the most part, as the document does not implicate victim purity or moral superiority, for instance.

Interestingly, the section in which the document sets the guiding principles of the victim-centred approach, makes it clear that the victims "have the right not to be judged, blamed or held responsible for the harm" (United Nations, 2021b: 20) through victim

blaming: asking what they were wearing, for instance. Moreover, the document stresses that assumptions about guilt or innocence should not be made (ibid.). Establishing a lack of responsibility is part of the ideal political victim discourse (Bouris, 2007), yet it is often tied to the characteristics of innocence and purity that collectively create a narrow understanding of who a victim is. In this case, however, the document explicitly separates the speculation of the guilt or innocence from the discourse.

Central to the training, and incorporated within *Facilitator notes*, are fictionalized *Case studies*, depicting scenarios of SEA that are inspired by actual events and meant to help the participants to better understand how the victim-centred approach is applied (United Nations, 2021b: 22). Four out of five cases presented involve a woman as the victim of SEA, with descriptions of what has taken place in these cases. Curiously, while the document emphasises that the cases “do not represent the behaviour of the majority of the thousands of individuals” (ibid.) working for the UN, they do not seem to pose the UN representatives in a purely saviour position, either. Instead, some of the cases include a member of the UN staff as a victim, as well as placed as perpetrators of SEA. Furthermore, a cornerstone of the fictionalized *Case studies* is critiquing what the UN staff member in each case, to whom the victim has reported the incident, could have done better to uphold victim rights the perspective of doing inadequate job in putting the victims’ rights first.

In addition, the *Case studies* put attention to the intersectional factors through which the victim might be in a more vulnerable position, as well as highlight the right of the victim to decide how involved they wish to be – to ensure maintaining a measure of control of the process (United Nations, 2021c: 2, 4). By acknowledging the individuality of the victims, as a notion of being engaged in the process of reporting, the complex political victim discourse emerges in part from the material. However, the victims’ rights are the rights that the UN has put out, so victim assistance is then limited within those rights – not considering, for instance, individual conceptualisations of justice and accountability. Agency of the victim seems to be limited that way, too.

Evidently, out of the material under analysis, the training module is making the greatest number of distinctions between the victims. The function of such descriptions seems to be to give an idea of who a victim is, yet staying away from too broad generalizations, and highlighting that anyone can be a victim. Apart from the descriptions, the document focuses on victims as it lays out the rights they have, including the right to be heard, to decide how involved one wants to be in investigations, as well as the right to justice and accountability, among others (United Nations, 2021b: 19). Furthermore, it specifies that upholding these



rights means ensuring that the victims have access to timely assistance, that their rights are prioritized, and that they “feel supported, empowered and protected from all forms of discrimination, retaliation and re-traumatization” (ibid.). Despite the promises, the document does not specify how they can be achieved, nor does it define what empowerment of victims, for instance, stands for. Though not necessarily invoking the ideal political victim discourse, the complex political victim does not have a prominent space either. The discourse is grouping victims into an entity that the UN can assist, albeit in unspecified ways – echoing the discourse identified in the other material.

### 4.1.3 Defining the Discourse

By keeping detailed descriptions of the victims to a minimum, but aiming to give diverse enough characterizations to point out that there is not only one type of a victim, the material seems to try not to invoke the ideal political victim discourse. The purpose of such descriptions seems to be a wider victim recognition, as the documents also address that UN staff members may be victims themselves.

Putting emphasis on elevating victims’ voices and giving them the right to choose how involved they want to be hints at an incorporation of a complex political victim discourse, yet the continuous positioning of the victims as an entity representable by the UN – through the VRA, for instance – as well as the sole focus on accountability on judicial terms suggests that the discourse present in the material is a mix of both ideal and complex political victim discourse. While the victims are not seen as an entirely homogenous group nor described through essentializing features, there is a notion of passivity and unspecified means to truly elevate victims’ voices.

Moreover, the red thread running through the discourse of the material is the position of the UN, who is constantly placed as the saviour in contrast to the victim – more specifically, as the body who can represent the victims, restore their dignity, as well as protect their rights. The SEA by UN personnel is continuously described as both a systemic problem, but inherently as the wrongful actions of a few individuals, seemingly justifying how the UN is fit to take on this task as the saviour. This becomes especially problematic, when considering reports by the victims on the poor measures of victim protection in interview situations, as well as the risk of re-traumatization by being interviewed multiple times due to poor coordination (REDRESS, 2017: 24, 28). This is only reflected upon in the selected UN data in the context of discussing non-United Nations international forces (A/71/818, 2017:

76), and further stressed in the training materials when highlighting that steps may need to be taken to avoid re-traumatisation.

Little effort seems to be done to concretely elevate the victims' perspective, and thus, the discourse about victims that the UN employs in its victim-centred measures addressing SEA by peacekeepers and personnel constructs a victim who exercises an unspecified amount of agency, defined both broadly yet in a non-essentializing manner. Most crucially, the victims are positioned within a victim-saviour binary, where they need the UN's help, and can be represented through different bodies of the UN.

## 4.2 Background Factors

Following the third phase of the analytical framework by Cummings, de Haan and Seferiadis (2020), considering how the material has been formed may help understand why the certain, identified discourses are present in them. A/RES/62/214, the *Comprehensive Strategy*, emerged as one of the results of the Zeid Report that laid out a strategy to eliminate SEA in UN peace operations. As one of the first resolutions addressing assistance and support to victims, the Comprehensive strategy was adopted by the UN General Assembly – with no details existing to show who has been part in crafting the resolution. *The report of the Secretary-General*, on the other hand, states that “the persistence of sexual exploitation and abuse” (A/71/818, 2017: 6) in the UN is the catalyser for that specific, victim-centred strategy. At the end, the document lists the entities who have been involved in preparing the report – notably, all of them are UN bodies (ibid.: 82).

The training module, in turn, is one of the results of the strategy laid out in the Secretary-General's report. Both the introduction video *I have the right*, and *Facilitator Notes* are born out of cooperation between the Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate, the Chief Executives Board (CEB) Task Force on Addressing Sexual Harassment, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), further noting that many “colleagues from across the United Nations system (...) contributed their expertise and feedback” (United Nations, 2021b: 2). The *Case studies* are mentioned to be specifically prepared in “close consultation with colleagues who work with victims, both in the field and in headquarters” (ibid.: 23).

Based on the available information on the background of the material, the main finding is that the actors involved in their creation are predominantly UN entities only. This could explain why the UN as a saviour discourse is embedded in such a strong manner within

the material, as well as why the victim perspective is not so evident, even though there is an attempt at it. Perhaps the way the UN seems to view itself as capable of representing victims is the reason why actual victims of SEA by UN peacekeepers and personnel have not been invited to cooperate in the creation of the documents, and instead, “colleagues who work with victims” have been engaged with. Though notes from the VRA refer to discussions with the victims (Connors, 2019), how these have been used to develop the responses is ultimately unclear. Exploring the actors behind the measures suggests low chances for victim agency, at least regarding participation in creating UN measures.

### 4.3 Discussion

Identification of the discourses and a look into the possible background factors influencing them allows for a discussion on the discourses themselves, as well as formulating ways past them, in accordance with the final phase of the analytical framework. As discussed in the theoretical framework, the UN embodies a dominant position in the production of human rights and peacebuilding discourses. Therefore, while it is not surprising that the UN positions itself as the saviour within its victim-centred approaches, the discourse ought to be contested – the UN’s Eurocentrism and illusions of universality are some of the main problems of the discourses it produces (Mutua, 2001). The perspective that seems to be missing from the material due to this framing is how the perpetrators are namely UN peacekeepers and other personnel. Though, as discussed, the UN has limited power to take judicial action against the perpetrators, it seems odd not to thoroughly problematize the position in the paradigm with the victim, seeing that the UN is trying to act as the saviour, while simultaneously placed within the paradigm as the perpetrator. Perhaps the stepping stone is institutional resistance to change, as Harrington (2022: 471) and others (see, e.g., Briant Carant, 2017) suggest.

As one of the main characteristics defining the ideal political victim discourse is the victim-perpetrator binary, it sparks the query whether the typically dominant discourse about victims was not present because of the UN’s complicated position as both the saviour and perpetrator. Had there been a different perpetrator than the UN, the victims may have been defined more strongly in relation to the victim-perpetrator binary. The focus on the UN as saviour instead of the perpetrator – done perhaps to frame the UN in a more positive than negative light – creates a more nuanced discourse about the victims as a result. Nevertheless, it simultaneously strips the victim of the full agency to engage with the discourses, as the UN

is seen capable to represent the victims and speak on the behalf of them in the saviour discourse.

Though the discourse about the victims that the UN evokes may not ultimately hinder victim recognition due to the broad descriptions given and the focus on individual needs, the consequences of the prevalent victim-saviour binary are too grave to ignore. Illustrated by the discussion on discourses of both the UN as the saviour (Mutua, 2001), and the essentialist woman-as-victim (Kapur, 2002; Mohanty, 2003; Raghavan 2023), power imbalances are evidently rooted within them. There is a danger of the creation of singular imaginary of victims that reflects only a Western and Eurocentric perspective, which the UN has a dominant position in disseminating. Furthermore, as the discourses inevitably continue to reproduce the narrative of the UN as the saviour, and simultaneously power imbalances, it is essential to seek out ways past the discourses.

As considered within the delimitations of this study, the author has not conducted interviews with victims, nor engaged with them during the research process. Thus, the suggestions past the discourses are not done in an attempt to represent the victims on their behalf – importantly, Madlingozi (2010: 210) questions whether it is even legitimate to ever do so. He argues that the human rights discourse, along with NGOs, often robs the victims of agency and sees the victim as someone to be rescued, and hence, he turns his focus to look at the Khulumani Support Group, a social movement of victims in attempt to overturn the unequal power relations (ibid.: 212-213). Situated in South Africa and established in 1995, the group is a national organisation of victims and survivors of human rights violations committed during apartheid (ibid.). Among its variety of activities, the group has mobilized through workshops that aimed for the “victims and survivors to identify issues that in their opinion still had to be resolved by the government” (ibid.: 217). Recalling Bouris’ (2007) conceptualisation of a complex political victim who engages with the discourses about them, the Khulumani Support Group seems to be a prime example of how this manifests in reality.

As the director of the Khulumani’s writes: “Victims and survivors are quite able to express for themselves what needs to be done” (Madlingozi, 2010: 224). Though the UN has vowed its commitment to “provide a platform” to elevate victims’ voices (A/71/818, 2017: 8), it unavoidably places the victims into a dependent position and strengthens the discourse of the UN as a saviour. Moving past this discourse requires serious rethinking of the way the UN presents and thinks of itself. Its aim to represent the victims will inevitably reduce the victim agency and block the emergence of a complex political victim – therefore, this mission ought to be re-evaluated. Due to the evident institutional resistance to change (Harrington, 2022),

repositioning the UN within this discourse may take more effort. As McEvoy and McConnachie (2013: 499) point out, the power relations within the discourses sometimes fail to be problematized even by those who genuinely see themselves representing the interests and views of victims. It would call for a systemic change, urging the UN to reflect on its Eurocentrism – and the Eurocentrism of overall human rights (Mutua, 2001). Whether the UN is ready for such a transformative reflection is difficult to define.

## 4.4 Concluding Remarks

To conclude this analysis, the main findings are summarized. The following research question has guided this study:

*Which discourses about the victims are present in the victim-centred measures by the UN, dealing with the sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers and other personnel?*

The results indicate that the discourse present in the selected material is a mix of both ideal and complex political victim discourses, and most plainly, continuously tied within a victim-saviour binary. Essential features of the ideal political victim discourse are rarely employed, suggesting an awareness of the importance of wide victim recognition, yet, on the other hand, the victims are often presented as a passive and helpless group. Instead of a victim-perpetrator binary, the victims are discursively trapped within a victim-saviour binary, where the UN is placed to elevate the victims' voices and protect their rights. The complex political victim emerges through the exercise of agency, though limited within the space of the binary with the UN. Moreover, individual needs of the victims are noticed, as well as the need for validity and accountability – however, individual conceptualisations of accountability, for instance, seem to receive limited attention.

As the analytical framework allowed the author to make suggestions to move past the discourses, the author has found the example of the Khulumani group to relate to Bouris' (2007) conceptualisation of the complex political victim who engages with the discourses disseminated about them. Instead of being defined by the discourse imposed from outside, the victims articulate their needs and wants themselves. To counter the UN as the saviour discourse, the author strongly urges a thorough re-evaluation of the UN's position in relation to the victims. As long as the UN presents itself as the saviour in relation to the victims,

especially while being the perpetrator, the victims are constructed discursively as a dependent group, taking away from their agency, and giving a false reflection of the reality.

## 5 Conclusion

Sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers and personnel continues to be a prevalent problem that the UN has addressed in a plethora of ways, employing a victim-centred approach in several of its measures. As an internationally relevant human rights institution, the UN holds power to produce dominant discourses that may affect the way people think and how they view the world. Generally, the discourse of an ideal political victim has been the dominant discourse about victims within the area of peacebuilding, invoked to help with making policy and recognizing victims (Bouris, 2007). However, the risk that the discourse carries is the recognition of only one type of a victim, who fits the image of an innocent and passive, ideal political victim (ibid.). Hence, this study has approached the research problem through an aim to identify and scrutinize the discourses about the victims that are present in the victim-centred UN measures that address SEA by peacekeepers and personnel.

The findings of this study imply that the victim that the measures produce discursively is a mix of an ideal political and complex political victim. More specifically, the victims are not described in an essentializing manner, and their individuality has been considered – hence, the measures engage with a more complex discourse about the victims than peacebuilding practices generally. Yet, the discourse still ends up grouping the victims together as both passive and helpless recipients of the UN’s assistance. The main reason for this is the strong presence of the UN as the saviour discourse that shows the UN as the pathway for victims to exercise their agency, yet on UN’s terms only. This finding aligns with previous research on discourses within UN documents – the UN is often positioned as the saviour, disregarding local knowledge (Briant Carant, 2017; Cummings et al., 2018; Harrington, 2022). To move past this discourse, rethinking of the UN’s positionality is key. Moreover, the Khulumani group showcases an example of how the complex political victim engages with the discourses about them, breaking through the dominant discourse.

The analytical framework by Cummings, de Haan and Seferiadis (2020), combining critical discourse analysis with policy analysis has allowed this study to scrutinize the discourses and power imbalances embedded in them in detail. Although it has given the author the chance to make suggestions to move past the dominant discourses, this has been limited by the author’s positionality and responsibility not to speak on the behalf of the victims, partially resulting in the choice not to conduct interviews or engage with victims. However, utilizing a wider variety of methods could enhance understanding the victim perspective more in-depth. The choice of theory, in turn, has allowed this study to scrutinize

the victim-centred measures through an exploration of three different discourses: ideal political victim, complex political victim, and the UN as the saviour -discourses. While the chosen discourses have produced a comprehensive analysis of the selected material, the author acknowledges that a choice of different theory would possibly produce different results.

Hence, interesting endeavours for future research appear regarding a further scrutinizing of discourses both about the victims, along with a deeper problematization of the UN as the saviour discourse. Employing a different theory – a postcolonial or an intersectional framing, for instance – could aid in pinpointing with more detail the imbalances that underpin the discourses. Moreover, as Ferstman (2020: 271) points out, the SEA committed by humanitarian aid workers has received even less academic attention than the UN, therefore, a similar study on the discourses that the aid organizations engage with would be a compelling subject for future research.



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