
Insights into community needs and wishes

People need effective humanitarian reporting systems for sexual exploitation and abuse in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, and practical information on them in languages they understand

Research report

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Summary: what you absolutely need to know

This study explores the extent to which sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH) reporting and referral systems in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are aligned with community and survivor preferences. It also explores the languages, formats and channels of communication provided for in current systems and compares them with community preferences. Translators without Borders/CLEAR Global conducted the research in partnership with and with funding from the World Health Organization.

In the Petit Nord region of North Kivu, women, men and aid workers identify multiple barriers to reporting SEAH. These relate to economic constraints, poor communication, narrowly targeted, ineffective and unsafe reporting mechanisms, and personal risk :

- 1. A woman's lack of financial independence is a critical risk factor for SEAH.** Many women enter relationships with humanitarians because they are not financially independent. They often benefit financially from such relationships, so they are unlikely to report them to an aid agency as SEAH. Communication geared to preventing SEAH typically disregards this reality and fails to explain the benefits of reporting. Women engaged in survival sex accordingly called for financial support.
- 2. Community members say it can be difficult to report SEAH safely and effectively.** Some women do not have access to mobile phones; people report that hotlines are often left unanswered; and women report that suggestion boxes are opened in public. The widespread failure of the legal system to effectively prosecute sexual violence also means people often do not trust referral systems. As a result, survivors face multiple risks when disclosing abuse, including violent reprisals. The safety of existing referral systems should be reviewed with community members.
- 3. More accessible communication around trusted SEAH reporting systems is needed.** People do not always know how to report SEAH because communication on reporting systems is not clearly understood. Images on posters are misinterpreted and much information is provided in French, a language that many in North Kivu do not understand. Communication material often does not answer people's basic questions about SEAH and does not contain practical advice on available support.
- 4. Communication efforts around SEAH need to target other at-risk groups - including men and adolescents - in addition to adult women.** Excluding these groups may mean that they do not know where to report SEAH when it occurs. They need sensitive reporting mechanisms and engagement campaigns tailored to their communication preferences and risk of stigmatization.

Recommendations

On that basis, we recommend that aid organizations engage with both women and men on making reporting safer and more user-friendly. Organizations can take the following steps to align their practice with community preferences on SEAH reporting :

- 1. Review and strengthen existing reporting mechanisms.** Work with communities to review the functioning and safety of existing reporting systems. Remove and report service providers and leaders who engage in abuse. Improve the functioning of suggestion boxes for confidential reporting by regularly reviewing and responding to submissions. For hotlines, ensure that calls are answered and that services are available in the right local languages. If people cannot access existing mechanisms, consult them on viable alternatives.
- 2. Set up and support safe reporting mechanisms that enable survivors to report face-to-face to, or with the support of, someone they trust.** Provide training and ongoing financial support for women's and community initiatives to accompany survivors as part of safe and functional reporting mechanisms and referral pathways. In the long term, aid agencies should help strengthen the Congolese justice system to ensure that survivors of SEAH can come forward safely and perpetrators are held accountable.
- 3. Improve communication on SEAH reporting for better comprehension.** Show communities the different reporting mechanisms they can access. Provide practical information on the process and the support men, women and children can receive. Remove posters promoting non-functioning hotline numbers from communities. Ensure that information is available in local languages and test text and images with audiences for comprehension and acceptability.
- 4. Develop strategies targeting men, adolescents and other at-risk groups.** Map at-risk groups who are not served by current communication efforts and reporting mechanisms. Develop specific strategies to reach these audiences that take account of both the barriers they face (including stigma) and their communication preferences. Strategies should also focus on promoting male behaviour that supports women to report abusive and exploitative relationships.
- 5. Help prevent SEAH through economic empowerment and livelihood support.** This could include pairing PSEAH-related communications activities with cash transfers. Associations Villageoises d'Épargne et de Crédit (AVEC) are popular and could be a positive avenue to support women financially.

We wanted to learn from survivors and community members about their experiences of reporting SEAH

Sexual violence in eastern DRC is widespread and often associated with armed groups and armed forces operating in the area. Sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment is also committed by humanitarians. Recent allegations of SEAH include abuse during DRC's tenth Ebola outbreak in Ituri and North Kivu Provinces¹. Humanitarian organizations have long provided services to SEAH survivors in this region. However, their explanations of sexual abuse can be framed through an external cultural lens and offer a simplified narrative of perpetrators, victims and internationally-determined solutions.²

We heard from 124 people in North Kivu

We asked women and men, including female survivors of abuse by humanitarians, about their experiences with SEAH reporting mechanisms set up by humanitarian organizations, and their perceptions of how effective these mechanisms are.

The research team used a range of tools as part of a qualitative approach. These included a rapid literature review; a mapping of languages, formats and communication channels of SEAH reporting mechanisms and referral pathways; and primary data collection with community members, aid workers and SEAH survivors, through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews.

Primary data collection took place over three weeks in eastern DRC. In all, the research team spoke with 106 participants from communities receiving assistance in two locations affected by the Nyiragongo volcano eruption in May 2021, including survivors of SEAH by humanitarians. They also spoke with 18 aid workers in Goma and Beni.

The main limitation of the research was that organizations helping to locate survivors of SEAH found few survivors in and around Goma willing to take part. Many survivors declined for fear of stigma or because past reporting had not led to reparations or support from aid agencies. Another limitation was that, in the short time frame of the study, the research team was unable to speak with male, adolescent or child survivors of SEAH by humanitarian workers.

¹ Samarasekera, U. Experts criticise WHO response to sex abuse allegations. *Lancet*, 2021;398:1291–3. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(21)02214-5.

² Autesserre, S. Dangerous Tales: Dominant Narratives on the Congo and their Unintended Consequences. *African Affairs*, 2012;111:202–2. doi:10.1093/afraf/adr080

Key findings: SEAH reporting mechanisms are not fully aligned with survivors' communication needs, safety concerns and reliance on survival sex

Survivors keep relations with aid workers a secret because they do not see them as SEAH, or because they fear the consequences of reporting

Women involved in this study did not always view sexual relationships with humanitarians as exploitation, abuse or harassment. In fact, most relationships with humanitarians were viewed as consensual, positive and, often, beneficial. One farmer and mother echoed the view of many when she said: "If you get into a relationship with a humanitarian you are lucky, it is like a gift from God". Relations with humanitarians were viewed as necessary for survival, women explained: "Without it, the children won't have anything to eat". This finding is supported by other research in DRC.³

Humanitarians, on the other hand, view such relationships between aid providers and aid clients as problematic and prohibited. Although explanations of key concepts related to SEAH vary among aid organizations, they commonly characterize SEAH as an unequal power relationship, often involving force, coercion and a lack of consent.⁴ This difference of perspective is a fundamental barrier to SEAH reporting. Women do not always report potentially exploitative or abusive relationships with humanitarians because they do not share the view that such relationships are problematic.⁵

Women and girls may be hesitant to come forward to report SEAH because of multiple risks in their communities

Most women interviewed in and around Goma said that they would not disclose a relationship with a humanitarian to anyone. This was the case for both married and unmarried women. Not only would they not report it to an aid agency; women would also keep the relationship secret from their husband, family and the wider community. As one married female farmer said: "If I had such a relationship, I would keep it in my heart and tell no one". The reason is simple: women face significant risks if they speak up.

The need for secrecy is understandable: women reported that if such a relationship with a humanitarian is found out, they risk stigma, loss of income and even physical violence.

Male community leaders in one community confirmed that women risk a beating if they report abuse to an aid agency. One older community leader said: "We will beat her if she speaks about it to an organization". He was applauded by the four other male leaders present when he explained why: "If not, we will all lose aid". This view may be specific to the particular community, where we were told insecurity limits the frequency of aid distributions. However, it is indicative of the level of personal risk women can face if they report SEAH. The consequences women face may also depend on their marital status.

³ Utafiti uliyo fanyika siku kidogo zilizo pita na Cellule d'Analyse Intégrée (CAI, iliyo julikana kama CASS), katika jimbo la Equateur, inchini Kongo, inaonesha pia kukubalika sana ndani ya jamii shuruli za ngono zinazo husisha wafanyakazi wa mashirika za kutowa misaada.

<https://www.unicef.org/drcongo/media/5901/file/COD-CASS-Equateur-PSEA-EN-correction.pdf>

⁴ Tazama kanuni sita za msingi kuhusu zuluma na unyanyasaji wa kingono kutoka Kamati ya kudumu ya ushirikiano wa mashirika (Inter-agence) hapa:

https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/iasc_six_core_principles_relating_to_sexual_exploitation_and_abuse_2002.pdf

⁵ Mwaka 2015, vituo vya mawasiliano ndani ya jamii inchini Jamuhuri ya Kidemokrasia ya Kongo viliripoti pia kwamba "jamii haikuona unyanyasaji wa kingono kuwa unyanyasaji "kwa kweli". Tembelea :

<https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2021-03/Best%20Practice%20Guide%20Inter%20Agency%20Community%20Based%20Complaint%20Mechanisms.pdf>

Married women risk stigma and losing their income and their families if they report SEAH

Married women in relationships with humanitarians will not always disclose these to aid agencies as they fear divorce, loss of income and stigma if the family or community find out. Some community members told us that married women who are suspected of having a relationship with a humanitarian can risk being brought to their husband's family so the couple's parents can discuss a financial settlement. Women said that at these meetings, family members often take their husband's side, even if the woman explains that the relationship was her only option "to feed the children". "They blame the women", one woman said. Another woman agreed: "They say women should not seduce the man."

Married women involved in the research described how they would therefore keep such relationships a secret. Women use the term *kisakoshe* to refer to a humanitarian in a relationship with a married woman.⁶ The word translates literally as "big bag" or "money bag". To keep the "money bag" secret, in one woman's account, "You tell your husband you are going out for vegetables ... If you have a *kisakoshe*, when you get back you go to a neighbour's house and you ask her if she can cook vegetables for you to show your husband so you can say you went to look for vegetables, while in fact you've been to see the *kisakoshe* so the children have something to eat."

Women report that when their husbands are more supportive, the need for a *kisakoshe* diminishes. As a woman in the rural research community said: "Men just spend the money on alcohol, but I need to feed the children". Others complained that men gamble while women "go to the field to farm for their children". Men involved in the research called for women to be show more consideration for their financial situation. Many reported challenges in finding an income, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Both women and men recognized that if women were more financially independent, they would not need a humanitarian *kisakoshe*.

Unmarried women risk losing education, their home and being forced to marry

Unmarried women face different risks when reporting SEAH, they told us. Women in the rural research community said they could be forced to marry their abuser after reparations are paid to the family in the form of livestock. Aid workers suggested that such informal settlements are becoming less common among educated families and in urban areas in the Petit Nord. Young women also told us that if the relationship is found out or if they get pregnant, they may be asked to leave their parents' home or have to drop out of school.

Survivors may decide not to come forward because they believe reporting SEAH will not have a positive outcome and may be dangerous

Many women told us they do not believe reporting SEAH always has a positive outcome. This is partly based on experiences of friends and family, but mostly on previous experiences of women in the community where the abuser was not a humanitarian. One survivor of repeated SEAH said: "I was raped, I reported it, but I was offered no solution. Why would I report"? Although different forms of sexual violence are illegal in Congolese law, survivors of sexual violence in eastern DRC rarely obtain justice.⁷ ⁸ ⁹ Women and legal aid providers involved in the research report that court procedures lack transparency and costs are unaffordable.

⁶ The term is also used to describe other wealthy individuals

⁷ FIDH. DRC: Victims of Sexual Violence Rarely Obtain Justice and Never Receive Reparation. Major changes needed to fight impunity. FIDH. 2013. (https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/rapport_rdc_.pdf)

⁸ Zongwe, D. P. The New Sexual Violence Legislation in the Congo: Dressing Indelible Scars on Human Dignity. *African Studies Review*. 2012; 55(2), 37-57. (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43904821>)

⁹ International Committee of the Red Cross. IHL Database, Customary IHL: Democratic Republic of the Congo. Practice Relating to Rule 93. Rape and Other Forms of Sexual Violence (https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v2_cou_cd_rule93)

Because of this widespread impunity, people see speaking up about SEAH as potentially dangerous, fearing that an abuser may turn violent if they are reported. As one trader, married with three children, explained: “Within three days of the abuser going to jail he would already be let out, and then you have to be careful: he can hire someone to come and kill you”. Community and family may therefore also discourage reporting.

Fig. 1 uses a hypothetical case to visualize the outcomes of reporting SEAH as envisioned by aid providers, and what often happens in practice. The graphic centres on the hypothetical case of Carine. Carine is not a real person, but a fictional character. For the purposes of this example, we assume that Carine wants to report abuse committed by a humanitarian providing aid services in her community.

Survivors want to report abusive and exploitative relations confidentially to a person they trust, of the same gender, but this is not always possible

Even with these barriers, survivors may decide to report to an aid agency when they start to perceive the relationship as abusive. This may be when it turns sour or violent or when promises about financial support are broken. Survivors speak of aid workers and peacekeepers abandoning them and their children when they leave to take up a new assignment. One survivor talked about her decision to report: “I was a cleaner for him and we started a relationship. For a year he paid for an apartment but suddenly he was gone. I told my boss about it”. Survivors of violent sexual assault and rape report that they did alert health workers to access medical help, even though they feared stigma in their community. One survivor told us: “He told me he had AIDS, I had to get tested.”

Female survivors said that they prefer to report abusive and exploitative relations to women they trust, ideally in their own language.¹⁰ All survivors involved in the research first reported their concerns to a female friend or family member, “who I knew would keep it secret” and only afterwards to a trusted Congolese female service provider (often based in the community). Of the survivors we spoke with most, most told service providers speaking local languages first, and had more positive experiences than those who reported through suggestion boxes and/or hotlines. 11 Women who reported to trusted local service providers told stories of support and understanding.

Survivors and other community members do not always trust hotlines and suggestion boxes to be effective and are sometimes hesitant to use them

Survivors and other community members in North Kivu also outlined issues with the existing reporting mechanisms and gave their own suggestions for overcoming them.

Women say suggestion boxes are not safe for reporting SEAH

Men and women explain that some suggestion boxes are not safe for reporting SEAH. A survivor recounted her experience of reporting through an INGO suggestion box: “He [the abuser] opened my complaint about him right there and then. He knew it was me. It was horrible”. She described her fear of reprisals by the aid worker, who had sworn her to secrecy. The survivor quit her job and has never worked for an NGO since. Both men and women involved in the research often also mentioned other problems with suggestion boxes. These include the fact that suggestion boxes are only opened sporadically; that reports never receive a response; and that the boxes are opened in public by a “complaints committee”, making confidential reporting very challenging.

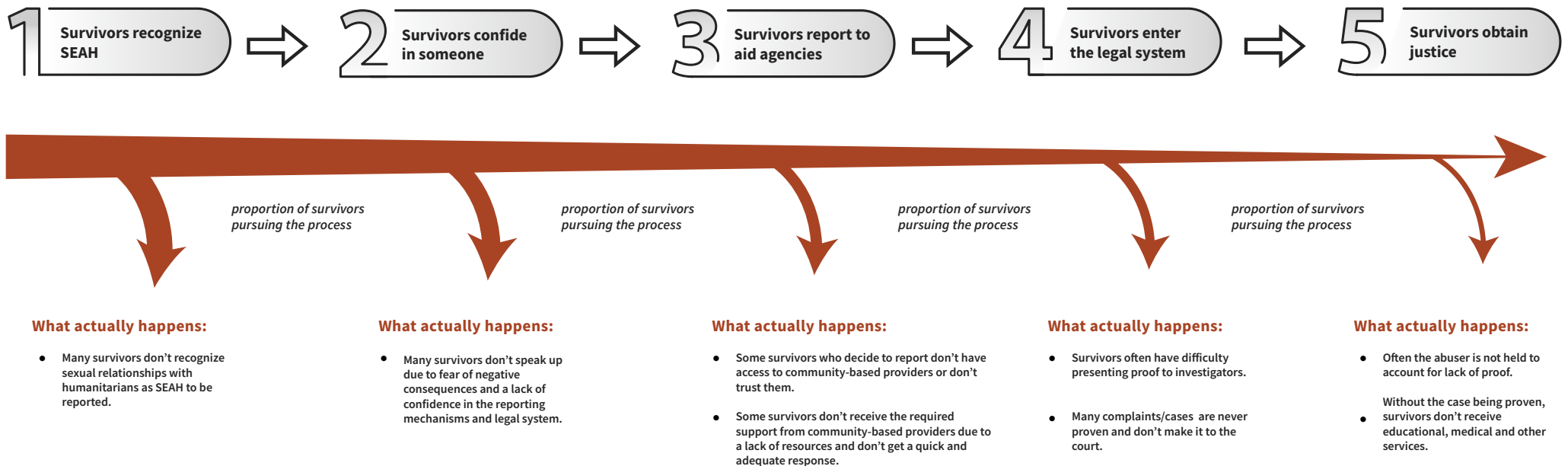
¹⁰ We did not speak with male survivors. Aid agencies working with male and boy survivors of SEAH should further explore preferences of male survivors when it comes to reporting SEAH.

¹¹ More research on the experiences of survivors when reporting to hotlines, suggestion boxes and other mechanisms of aid agencies is needed to better understand these dynamics.

Aid workers in Goma suggest that suggestion boxes placed strategically in female-only locations like public toilets for women may be more successful. They also report that in other parts of North Kivu local organizations have overcome some of these challenges with suggestion boxes. For example, in Ebola-affected areas of Beni and Butembo, community based organizations have female-only committees opening the boxes more regularly. These aid workers propose that organizations document successful techniques and share with others.

Fig. 1: Reporting does not always result in the intended outcomes for survivors of sexual abuse, exploitation and harassment in North Kivu

The intended pathway set out by aid agencies:



*** Outcome: the process stalls and there is no justice for the survivor.**

Men like hotlines but female survivors prefer to report face-to-face

Women involved in the research (including survivors) did not mention hotlines as a preferred mechanism for reporting SEAH. Instead, they say they would rather report to a woman they know and trust (and not an anonymous operator they have never met). One hotline operator confirmed that survivors would often not disclose what had happened to them over the phone. She had to meet survivors in person to have a meaningful conversation, she said: “They feel it's uncomfortable to tell it to a person they never met before”. She often meets survivors in secret, because they fear stigma in their community.

Men say they like hotlines because they are used to calling humanitarian organizations to report issues of concern anonymously. Many organizations in DRC have set up hotlines where aid clients can talk to operators, who record their concerns (for example, about aid and food distributions). Men say they are used to these mechanisms and like the fact that they can call a (free) hotline rather than spending money on transport to go to an NGO office¹². A PSEA focal point in Goma confirmed that most people who call the interagency SEAH reporting hotline are men. However, men involved in the research did not know the number of the interagency hotline for SEAH.

Both women and men also identified practical barriers that made reporting to hotlines less effective. Women in rural areas and from poorer families said they do not have access to mobile phones. Men said that hotlines often are not answered and that operators promise to call back and frequently do not. The research team was able to confirm this directly. When we contacted the 11 hotlines used by more than 23 organizations in eastern DRC, it often took multiple calls during business hours before the phone was answered. Hotlines also often do not operate outside aid organizations' working hours. Women and men are often on their farms or doing other work during office hours and would prefer to speak with operators in the early morning, late evening or over the weekend.

A challenge for survivors reporting abuse is that operators of national hotlines often do not speak the right local languages

Another challenge is that organizations running nationwide hotlines from Kinshasa (including the interagency SEAH reporting hotline, 49 55 55) provide information only in official or national languages (see Fig. 2). These hotlines operate in French, Lingala and Tshiluba (national languages many people in eastern DRC do not understand), and Congolese Swahili (which many do not speak or are not confident speaking). Many research participants said they prefer to give and receive information in local languages like Kumu and Nande (see Fig. 3 and 4). Sometimes operators may also offer information in their own local languages,¹³ but given such centres are run from the capital it is unlikely that many operators speak the local or minority languages of North Kivu.

Most organizations offering PSEA services in the Petit Nord, especially national NGOs, promote the use of the Kinshasa-based interagency hotline for SEAH reporting (using the toll-free line 49 55 55). International NGOs often prefer to set up their own community feedback hotlines and give a phone to one or more local language speakers on their teams (often the M&E or safeguarding officer). Other NGOs call on community based networks and staff in North Kivu for translation and interpreting support, some trained on PSEA and some not. None of these organizations offered professional interpreting or translation, or provided staff performing those roles with the relevant training.

¹² All hotlines used by PSEA partners working in North Kivu, with one exception, operate free of charge. We called 44 PSEA focal points working in North Kivu for 23 organizations. These organizations use a total of 11 different hotlines for SEAH reporting in North Kivu.

¹³ During the mapping, for example, we spoke with a Nande speaker based in Kinshasa.

We were told of cases where women were unable to make a confidential report to a hotline operated from Kinshasa or understand the information provided because their preferred language was not available. In such cases hotline operators either ask the caller to find someone to interpret for them, or themselves look for a colleague who can interpret. This practice was reported by aid workers based in North Kivu and confirmed by the mapping exercise for this study. There is not always a formal vetting process for the interpreter in such cases. Aid workers recognize that survivors may not feel they can trust either an unknown interpreter or another community member with such sensitive information.

Fig. 2: Languages of hotlines operating in North Kivu mapped by TWB

#	Run by	Languages the hotline officially offers
1	UN	French, Swahili, Tshiluba, Lingala
2	INGO	French, Swahili
3	INGO	French, Swahili, Tshiluba, Lingala
4	INGO	French, Swahili, Tshiluba, Lingala
5	UN	French, Swahili, Tshiluba, Lingala
6	UN	French
7	NGO	French and Swahili
8	UN	French and Swahili
9	UN	French and Swahili
10	INGO	French and Swahili
11	INGO	French and Swahili

Aid workers involved in the research said another challenge for effective reporting through hotlines is that people reporting abuse often speak in the third person or use euphemisms (also referred to as “hidden terms”). “This may make it difficult for untrained operators to spot abuse during a call [to a general community feedback hotline] and refer it to the right person”, says an aid worker based in Kinshasa. It is common for survivors in DRC and elsewhere to use evasive language to speak about sexual abuse.¹⁴ This is particularly the case when men report abuse, because of the stigma it carries. A humanitarian described one such case: “I knew that it had happened to him by how he spoke and how he reacted, but he could not tell me directly.”

¹⁴ Stark L, Sommer M, Davis K, Asghar K, Assazene Baysa A, Abdela G, et al. Disclosure bias for group versus individual reporting of violence amongst conflict-affected adolescent girls in DRC and Ethiopia. PLoS ONE. 2017;12(4): e0174741. (<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0174741>)

Fig. 3: The main languages of research participants in communities

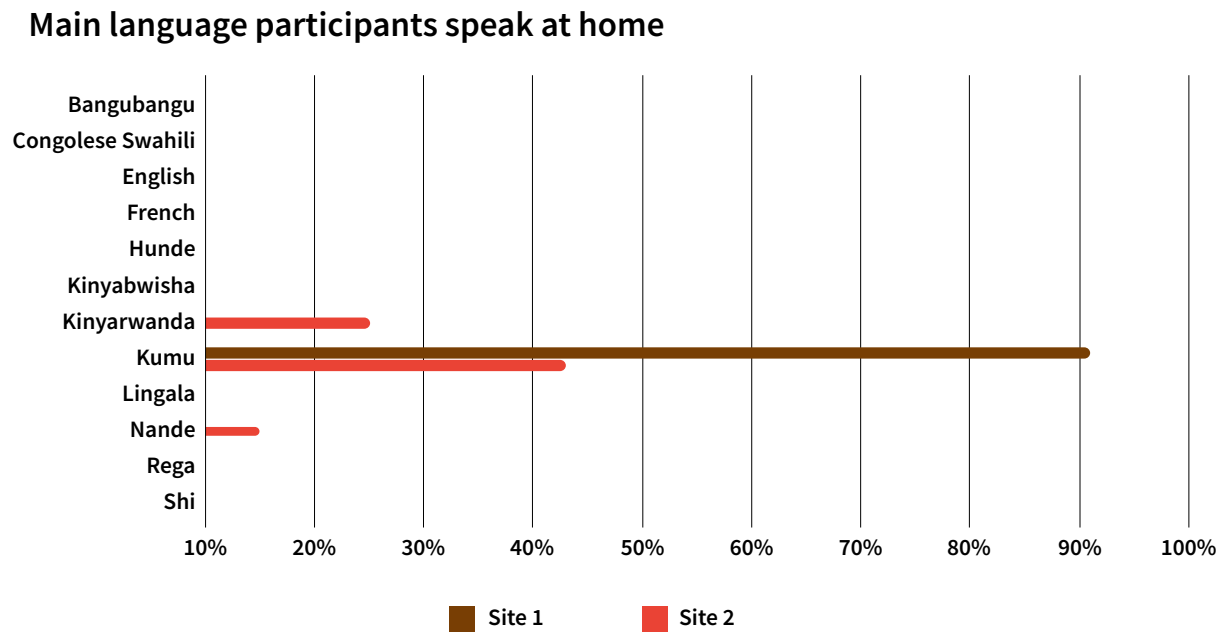
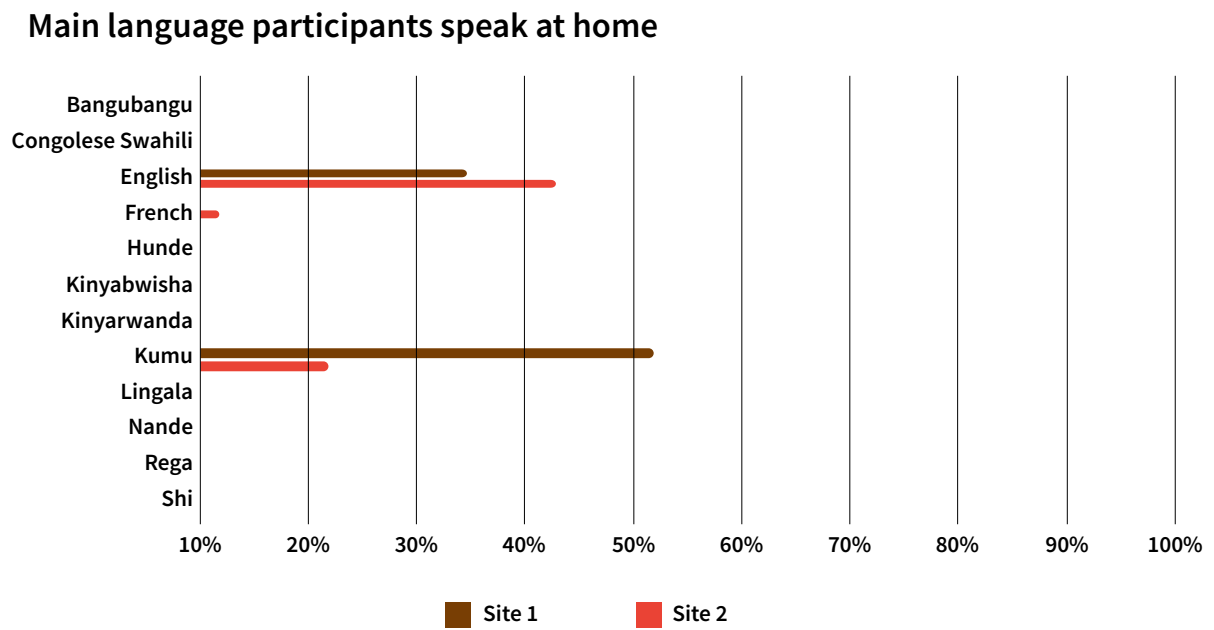


Fig. 4: Other languages spoken by research participants in communities



People do not always know how to report SEAH because communication on the available reporting systems is not clearly understood

Much communication material on SEAH is not clearly understood by survivors, women and other community members. As a result, many people do not know how to report SEAH cases confidentially to get an effective response.

People are confused by communication material promoting many different reporting mechanisms, some no longer in use

International NGOs and UN agencies have often set up their own reporting mechanisms like hotlines and suggestion boxes. Each organization also uses its own communication strategy and material to promote uptake. As a result, many different posters can be found in communities around eastern DRC (see Fig. 5, for example). Reporting mechanisms are used not only for SEAH but also for general feedback and complaints.

Women and men involved in the research say they find this confusing. One male farmer's comment expresses the frustration created by the lack of clarity: "I do not know which number to call. There are too many here in the village". Another problem is that some of the hotline numbers printed on the posters are out of service, and some suggestion boxes are no longer functional. Aid workers confirm that suggestion boxes and posters are often not removed when programmes close. No up to date document available in the community – or for that matter, at the coordination level in Goma 15 – sets out all the available hotlines and reporting systems.

It is therefore unclear to communities and service providers how many hotlines aid organizations are operating in communities across North Kivu Province; what the phone numbers are; if they are toll-free; and what languages hotline operators speak. As part of this research, we called 23 member organizations of the PSEA network in Goma (with the help of 43 focal points), who provided us with 11 hotline numbers.

¹⁵ No overview of current reporting mechanisms is available for Nyiragongo Territory at the time of writing. A mapping has been done in Beni Territory by UNICEF/PSEA network.

Fig. 5: Posters explaining hotlines set up by humanitarian agencies



People do not understand languages used in communication material

Both women and men in target communities often find communication material intended to inform communities about SEAH and reporting mechanisms hard to understand. Many posters that the research team observed in and around research communities in Nyiragongo Territory are written in French. Many people in this area do not read French and may prefer to read Congolese Swahili (see Fig. 3 and 4).¹⁶ Many participants, especially those without a formal education, prefer to receive information in local languages like Kumu or Kinyarwanda.

Posters are also often text-heavy (see Fig. 5), making them inaccessible to non-literate audiences. Rural women are less likely to have completed primary education than either men, or women in urban areas. Material intended for women in rural areas should take account of their communication preferences.

Graphic communication can be helpful but is often misinterpreted

We showed male and female research participants from the communities illustrations from a brochure produced by a PSEA network member to promote the interagency reporting hotline. When we tested their comprehension, we found that some images on SEAH posters and other material are poorly understood and misinterpreted.

Fig. 6 is an example of an illustration misinterpreted by community members. Many women and men who we asked to view the image understood it to represent a conflict around eligibility for a food distribution, not a case of SEAH. A female trader living in an internally displaced people's camp interpreted the image as showing: "That girl is not on the beneficiary list. Her parents brought her to the aid worker to be registered".

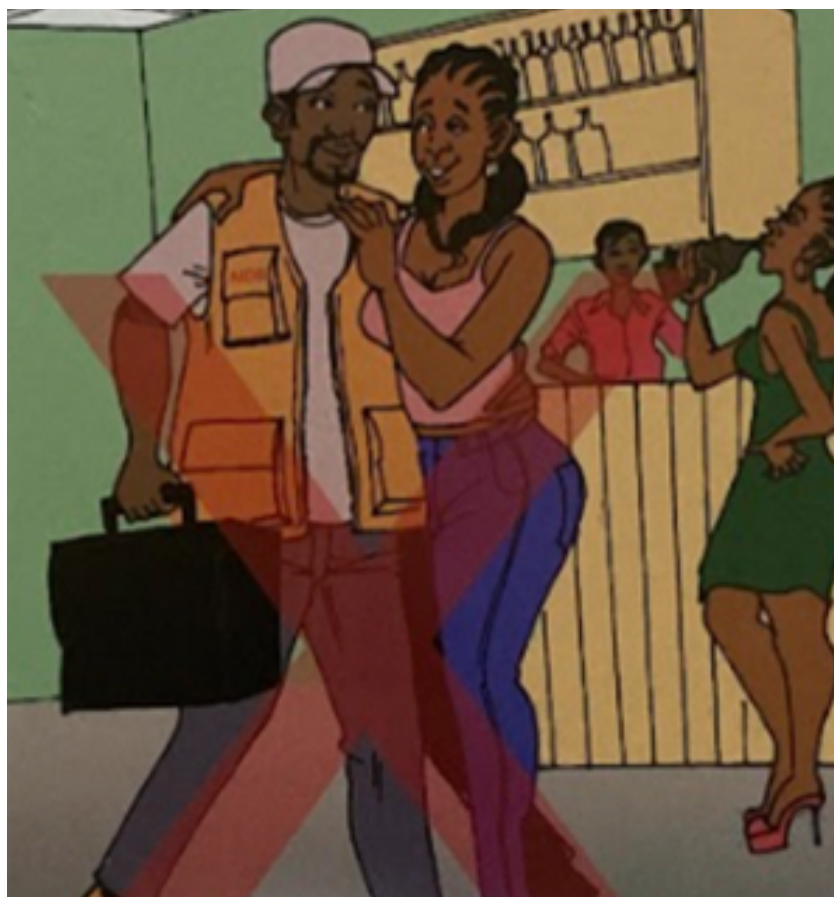
¹⁶ See also TWB's language map of DRC: <https://translatorswithoutborders.org/language-map-of-drc-interactive-en>

Fig. 6: Community members didn't understand the image as illustrating SEAH



Some images may also reinforce the blaming of women engaged in survival sex. Fig. 7 was shown to a group of male traders in one of the research sites. The men read the image as depicting prostitution (“She is seducing him; she is a prostitute”), which they see as “a sin for a woman”. Using such images can increase stigma for survivors. Women in the same community reported that they are already blamed “when a humanitarian wants them and they cannot say no”. Stigma and shame are an important factor for many women in deciding not to report relationships with humanitarians.

Fig. 7: Images like this may reinforce stigma for women who engage in survival sex



Images focused on force and non-consent seem to be better understood by both men and women as depicting sexual abuse, exploitation and harassment. For example, Fig. 8 was understood as illustrating sexual abuse, because of the girl's facial expression and the fact that force is used. "This guy is taking this girl with force. This is violence", said one female farmer. Such images are likely better aligned with community understanding of SEAH as being non-consensual and often involving violence. Identifiers for aid workers like white jeeps and utility vests are widely understood.

Fig. 8: Images showing SEAH as non-consensual were better understood



People want practical information on the reporting mechanisms available to them, how they work and what support they offer

Women in the research sites say they need more practical and usable information to be able to make informed decisions about their lives and the lives of children born of relationships with humanitarians. Instead of aid organizations telling women what behaviour is prohibited, women want to know what support they can expect if they do report SEAH. Additionally, implying that survivors may be doing something wrong may be counterproductive, as survivors may fear getting into trouble if they report abuse.

Currently, posters often focus on explaining that sexual relations with humanitarians are wrong and prohibited, but often do not clearly explain how to report SEAH and what support is available to survivors. The poster in Fig. 9 is one example. The text on the poster reads: "Humanitarian aid is a right and cannot be exchanged for sexual or other favours" It does not include a phone number for reporting. As a result, research participants did not know where to report the behaviour described.

Fig. 9: A poster informing communities of their right to humanitarian aid free from SEAH, but without details of where to report SEAH



Survivors and other women involved in the research said they wanted to know what reporting mechanisms are available to them; what they can expect from these mechanisms and when; and what kind of conduct they can and should expect from aid workers. This is very different from offering advice on how a woman living in a complex emergency should and should not behave. Both women and men want that information to be made available to them in local languages and in accessible formats.

Men, adolescents and other at-risk groups are not targeted in SEAH campaigns and may not know where to report abuse

Communication materials focus on the experiences of adult women abused and exploited by men. While the available data suggests adult women are the most frequent survivors of SEAH in eastern DRC, they are not the only survivors. Men, adolescents and other survivors are not targeted in outreach efforts and communication material. The failure to engage with these at-risk audiences may prolong violence and trauma, with potentially long-term repercussions for their sexual, reproductive and mental health.¹⁷

Posters, for example, do not include images of men or boys as victims of SEAH, or speak of abuse by women, although sexual abuse of men and boys is widespread in DRC, as in other conflict and forced displacement settings. Internalized feelings of shame, fear of stigmatization and services that do not recognize men as victims prevent the majority of male victims from reporting.¹⁸

Similarly, adolescent boys and girls are at heightened risk of SEAH but not specifically targeted by aid agencies as audiences with their own information needs and communication preferences. Yet abuse during adolescence can have lifelong negative impacts, including lower educational attainment and poverty.¹⁹

Including these other at-risk audiences in engagement and communication efforts is critical to stop the abuse. To support men, adolescents and other survivors, aid organizations should work to counter stigma and provide information on how they can report safely. This will need a cautious and sensitive approach, particularly for same-sex relationships, which are largely hidden due to discrimination and fear of violence.

Engaging with men as supportive actors could enable women to report abuse and exploitation by humanitarians

Current efforts miss an important opportunity to involve men in behaviour change strategies intended to prevent SEAH and increase women's reporting. Men play a critical role in enabling women to report. Both women and men told us that when a man is supportive, a woman will be more likely to report SEAH. "It depends if the man has a good relationship with his wife", one man in a periurban community told us: "If it is good, he will help her". Fathers, uncles and brothers can also support in this way, say aid workers. Engagement strategies could encourage such behaviour.

¹⁷ Stark L, Sommer M, Davis K, Asghar K, Assaznew Baysa A, Abdela G, et al. Disclosure bias for group versus individual reporting of violence amongst conflict-affected adolescent girls in DRC and Ethiopia. PLoS ONE. 2017;12(4): e0174741. (<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0174741>)

¹⁸ Dolan C. Into the mainstream: addressing sexual violence against men and boys in conflict. Refugee Law project, Uganda. 2017. (https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Into_The_Mainstream-Addressing_Sexual_Violence_against_Men_and_Boys_in_Conflict.pdf)

¹⁹ Stark L, Sommer M, Davis K, Asghar K, Assaznew Baysa A, Abdela G, et al. Disclosure bias for group versus individual reporting of violence amongst conflict-affected adolescent girls in DRC and Ethiopia. PLoS ONE. 2017;12(4): e0174741 : <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0174741>

Fig. 10: Survivors' experiences of reporting are often very different from the experience they are hoping for



*FGD participants discussed the preferred and the more likely trajectory of the fictional character Carine. The content is taken from their discussions.

To improve the status quo, women want aid agencies to work with local organizations and community based initiatives they know and trust

Women and survivors say that they prefer aid agencies to work with Congolese women and organizations they trust. Where aid agencies partner with local organizations to accompany individuals reporting SEAH, we heard countless stories of support. One of the most memorable was of a female community leader who accompanied a rape survivor to the health centre, providing moral support when the young woman feared seeking health care. "She trusted me because I kept her secret", said the leader afterwards. (Read the story in Fig. 10).

Fig. 11: What a positive experience looks like for a survivor (case study)

Carine lives in an IDP camp near Virunga National Park. She is at secondary school and has started a relationship with an aid worker. He said he could help her get more flour and oil during aid distributions if she had sex with him. Carine consented. But at one point the aid worker got violent with Carine and raped and beat her. Carine was afraid of what her parents would say so instead she told a trusted female community leader what had happened.*

*"Carine was a student and I knew that her parents would make her drop out of school [if they knew about the abuse]. She wanted to keep it a secret so she could stay in school", explained the women leader.** She asked Carine to follow her to the health facility near where Carine lived, always making sure that she was a few metres in front of Carine so that no one would think that they were together. At the health facility she negotiated for Carine and ensured that she got medicine. When her parents eventually found out, the leader pretended she was meeting Carine for the first time.*

** Carine is a fictional name. The story is loosely based on a report that we received during the research. We have changed key elements to ensure the confidentiality we promised.*

*** The community leader was part of this research. Her experience is real.*

In response to this request from communities, some international aid organizations have formed strategic partnerships with community based organizations and initiatives. This should continue, making it clear that the role of the local organization is to accompany the survivor rather than to receive the report on behalf of the international organization which carries responsibility. Many women's initiatives have already received training on how to respond to rape and sexual violence from agencies working on gender-based violence. They could also be trained in SEAH reporting and prevention. Such service providers often have the trust of women in the community and are already sought out when women face challenges relating to SEAH. Where women were involved in selecting the individuals involved, they said they trusted them.

To increase reporting, women called for aid agencies to train and support community based women's groups and provide them with resources to accompany survivors when they report. This would include support for shared phones, credit, transport fees and volunteer stipends. "We know the community and can tell you how best to help women", said one woman farmer involved in a local women's initiative in one of the research communities. Community members and local organizations suggested that aid organizations should approach community groups as partners with shared decision-making in how survivor accompaniment happens. They also felt that longer-term financial support would be beneficial in establishing these practices.

Women want to be involved in vetting trusted individuals to ensure that reporting mechanisms are safe and confidential

Supporting community based accompaniment for survivors reporting SEAH by community-vetted representatives could build trust and help keep survivors safe. As mentioned, all the women we spoke to preferred to report face-to-face to women they trust. Ideally, they told us, such representatives should be selected by women and other at-risk groups, and remain in continuous consultation with them. "Here we know who is a good representative for us and who is not", one female farmer said simply.

This is critical, as currently not all face-to-face reporting mechanisms are safe. Women reported that some actually put women at risk of further abuse. In one community women were encouraged to report SEAH to a health facility, which was promoted as a safe space. However, health providers in the facility would request sex in exchange for health services. At another research site, both women and men reported that a block leader

was demanding sexual favours from internally displaced women in exchange for aid agencies' food parcels. This same leader was on the complaints committee set up by an international NGO to deal with concerns raised through suggestion boxes.

If survivors report to a community organization, however, there is a risk of that organization distancing international agencies from their responsibilities, or trust in community organizations being eroded by inadequate response to reports. Instead, a system of community accompaniment for survivors who report could provide the trusted engagement women want, without obscuring where the real responsibility lies.

Women do not just want information on how to report SEAH but the financial independence to avoid exploitation

Humanitarians interviewed displayed a keen awareness of weaknesses in the current system, but the research found a gap in understanding between them and community members on the preferred solutions. Aid workers call for investment in sensitization, but communities say they need poverty reduction support to stop SEAH. They were acutely aware that exploitative relations with humanitarians are not desirable.

For many aid workers, the solution to high rates of SEAH is to "raise more awareness about SEAH and reporting mechanisms". One aid worker in Goma voiced an opinion echoed in conversations with others: "Women here do not see it as a problem to have sex with a humanitarian. It is ignorance. We should invest in sensitization".

Our research, however, suggests it is counterproductive to dismiss the survival strategies of Congolese women. It obscures the fundamental challenges women face in providing for their families. It also denies both women's agency and the share of responsibility that aid organizations carry for the choices open to them.

All women consulted in communities, including survivors, called for financial assistance for the prevention of SEAH. They said women would not need to start relationships with aid workers if they had financial independence. Women want aid organizations to provide small business loans or monetary support as a means of prevention.

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Annex 1: Abbreviations

AVEC	Associations Villageoises d'Épargne et de Crédit
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
FGD	Focus group discussion
IDI	In-depth interview
IDP	Internally displaced person
INGO	International non-government organization
IRC	International Rescue Committee
KII	Key informant interview
MONUSCO	United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DR Congo
NGO	Nongovernmental organization
PSEAH	Prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse and harassment
SEA	Sexual exploitation and abuse
SEAH	Sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment
TWB	Translators without Borders
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization

Annex 2: Methodology

The research employed a range of qualitative tools. First, we did a rapid literature review. Second, we carried out a rapid mapping of languages, formats and communication channels of SEAH reporting mechanisms and pathways used by aid agencies in eastern DRC. Third, primary data collection with community members, aid workers and SEAH survivors took the form of focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews.

Research tools

The research team used the following research tools :

Literature review

The literature review used Google Scholar. The lead researcher searched academic publications and gray literature from aid agencies operating in DRC specifically. The following search terms were used: abuse, aid, conflict, Congo, DRC, exploitation, harassment, humanitarian aid, humanitarians, peacekeepers, PSEA, rape, reporting, SEA, SEAH, sexual abuse, sexual violence, Sub-Saharan Africa, UN. Due to time constraints, the review only included articles published in the last 10 years in English.

Mapping

The research team compiled a list of hotlines and other mechanisms that humanitarian organizations promote in eastern DRC for SEAH reporting. The list was compiled with the support of the PSEA network in Goma, which provided a list of aid agencies involved in PSEAH in eastern DRC. Other hotline numbers were found by reviewing communication material promoted in eastern DRC, complemented by an Internet search. A team member then called the hotlines and documented the languages and platforms used.

Primary data collection

The research team travelled to eastern DRC in late November/early December. Qualitative research activities involving 124 people took place over a three-week period (see Table 1). Research tools were designed in such a way that survivors were never asked to disclose experiences related to abuse. Interview questions were crafted around vignettes using fictional characters. Vignettes are used in qualitative research to provide a less personal and a less threatening way of exploring sensitive topics.²⁰

Research sites

The qualitative research was conducted in Nyiragongo Territory, North Kivu Province, in two research communities. Both communities were affected by the Nyiragongo volcano eruption in May 2021 and receive emergency aid from a number of humanitarian agencies. The volcano eruption displaced around 450 000 people. Many households are still living in temporary sites supported by aid agencies and the Congolese government.

Two research communities were selected in consultation with WHO, the PSEA network, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and UNICEF's Cellule d'Analyse Intégrée (CAI). The sites were selected because representatives of these organizations had been informed of SEAH concerns in the area. The site selection also took account of IRC safety and security regulations, as IRC provided security support for the study. The communities are not named in this report, in response to requests from local government officials and customary chiefs.

The first research community (site 1) is located at the border of Virunga National Park and has long suffered from insecurity and armed violence. The community was badly affected by the eruption of the nearby Nyiragongo volcano in 2021. Lava destroyed neighbouring villages and the community now hosts thousands of internally displaced people (IDPs) in an informal camp. While camp residents have unique vulnerabilities, host community members also live in precarious circumstances with little to no access to formal employment. Both largely live from subsistence agriculture.

The second research community (site 2) is periurban, located closer to the provincial capital of North Kivu, Goma (see Map 2). Goma is a commercial trading hub serving DRC, Uganda and Rwanda and most residents of site 2 live from trading and subsistence farming. Crime and armed violence are a common problem, particularly at night. A MONUSCO peacekeeping force is stationed nearby and the community hosts a temporary internally displaced camp. People who fled the volcano eruption still live in makeshift tents of torn tarpaulin without access to clean drinking-water.

Aid workers who took part in the research are involved in providing humanitarian services across North Kivu, including to communities in Nyiragongo and Beni Territories.

Sample and sampling strategy

Employing a purposive sampling strategy based on age, location and proximity, the research team spoke with 124 people (see Table 1). People living in internally displaced settlements and host community members were invited to participate.²¹

²⁰ Barter, C., Renold, E. The Use of Vignettes in Qualitative Research. *Social Research Update*, 1999;(25). (<https://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU25.html>)

²¹ IRC organized the research activities at the two research sites and selected participants on the basis of criteria provided by the research team.

To better understand the functionality of existing SEAH reporting mechanisms researchers also interviewed 18 humanitarian workers involved in SEAH in eastern DRC. They work for various types of humanitarian agencies, including INGOs, NGOs, CSOs and the UN. Each has a role in humanitarian PSEAH systems – including responding to complaints, working on prevention and referring and supporting survivors. Their duties included carrying out investigations and representing victims in the legal system.

In partnership with Sauti Ya Mama Mukongomani, the research team also conducted in-depth interviews with 10 survivors of SEAH by aid workers in Nyiragongo Territory. Sauti Ya Mama Mukongomani is a Congolese not-for-profit organization working in peace-building and against sexual and gender-based violence in eastern DRC²². The organization provides direct legal assistance to survivors of humanitarian abuse, also by humanitarians. Female service providers who are already in direct contact with survivors were trained in the research approach and tools. They then conducted the interviews with remote support from the TWB researchers.

Fig. 12: Research participants at each research site

Tool	Type	Beni Territory	Nyiragongo Territory				Total	
		Beni	Goma	Site 1		Site 2		
				IDP	Host	IDP		Host
FGD	Women (25-18 years)			5	5	5	4	19
	Men (25-18 years)			4	5	2	6	17
	Women (>25 years)			12	7	5	6	30
	Men (>25 years)			1	9	5	5	20
KII	Service providers			1			1	2
	Community leaders				4		2	6
	Humanitarians	2	16					18
IDI	Survivors		10		2			12
Total		2	26	23	32	17	24	124

²² <https://smmukongomani.org/>

Ethical considerations

Research on a sensitive topic like SEAH requires specific safeguards for the welfare of participants. We took several measures to ensure research ethics for dealing with vulnerable research participants were followed :

- Researchers involved in this study were selected in part based on their experience in doing research on taboo subjects related to gender and abuse and were trained on key principles in dealing with vulnerable research participants.
- The research tools were designed in such a way that survivors were never asked to disclose experiences related to abuse. If a survivor did want to disclose information, a staff member from IRC or Sauti Ya Mama Mukongomani was present to provide aftercare.
- The research approach was presented to and cleared by the PSEA network in DRC. This meant that researchers could refer victims to aid agencies – when requested to do so by participants, always ensuring confidentiality of reporting.
- Service providers from IRC and Sauti Ya Mama Mukongomani interviewed survivors with whom they already had a relationship of trust, with remote support from the TWB team. This maintained the anonymity of the survivors, in line with aid agencies' commitments of confidentiality towards them.

Limitations

Conducting interviews with survivors through organizations providing services directly to survivors of SEAH may have introduced reporting bias, as those organizations depend on donor support. It may also have limited the information interviewees were willing to share. To mitigate this risk, several measures were put in place, including careful training of the research team in trauma sensitive interviewing skills. Deep debriefing sessions after data collection and the use of structured interview guides provided ongoing feedback and support to the interviewers. With these measures in place the research team feels that this risk was sufficiently mitigated.