

"Women at Risk": Assessing Physical Assault and Rape in Goma, Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo

Dr. Adventina Laurent

Tanzania Regional Immigration Training Academy

Dr. Faustine Kashumba

The University of Dodoma

Dr. Joseph Kahimba

The University of Dodoma

Abstract

Despite the presence and responsibility of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) to protect civilians in accordance with international humanitarian law, hope remains elusive for women facing physical attacks and sexual violence in Goma. This study explores women's vulnerability to such violence using a mixed-methods approach, including surveys, focus groups, observation, and document review. Among 276 survey respondents and 23 key informants, findings show a sharp increase in physical attacks and rape since MONUSCO's arrival. In Masisi Kirotshe, reported rapes surged from a yearly average of 10–44 before MONUSCO to 14,014 cases between 2020 and 2021. Similarly, Masisi Centre health zone saw 7,000 rape cases in 2020–2021, compared to just 7–35 instances annually before. Analysis indicates women are disproportionately affected: they are nearly three times more likely than men to face unprotected situations leading to attacks (OR=2.945, $p<.0001$), and over six times more likely to be raped (OR=6.522, $p<.0001$). Contributing factors include single or abandoned marital status, gender-based differences, and work in remote, unsafe areas. The study concludes that women and girls remain at heightened risk of violence, despite international protection efforts.

Keywords

MUNUSCO, women vulnerability, physical attacks, rape, Goma, DRC

1 Introduction

The physical assault and rape committed by armed groups cannot be separated; despite the bitterness and humiliation these acts inflict, they occur against human beings and leave indelible psychological and physical scars. The Great Lakes region has endured decades of violence, including ethnic conflicts, genocide, civil wars, coups, and unsuccessful attempts at democratic transition (Towner, 2011: 1). Notable examples include the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, the civil war in Burundi from 1993 to 2005, and ongoing violence in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), all of which mark the region's troubled history since decolonization (Vollhardt et al., 2015: 489).

Although it is widely acknowledged that vulnerable populations, particularly women and children, deserve protection, insurgents and militia groups have repeatedly used violence against women as a tactic to intimidate governments and communities, furthering their own objectives (Towner, 2011: 6; Arieff, 2010: 1). Since the 1960s, the DRC has experienced both internal conflicts and invasions by foreign armies—including those from Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi, Angola, Eritrea, and Somalia (Lubunga, 2016: 351). Eastern DRC remains the most affected area (Lubunga, 2016: 351), with conflicts often driven by the struggle to control resources outside the state apparatus (Padrigu et al., 2004: 48). While International Humanitarian Law clearly stipulates that non-combatants, such as women, children, and the elderly, must not be targeted, women in particular have suffered as victims of war (Waszinck, 2011: 3). This victimization has taken the form of killings, injuries, rape, forcible displacement, gang rape, and sexual slavery (UN Report, 2019: 16), as well as indirect consequences such as disease, hunger, and malnutrition caused by conflict in North and South Kivu provinces (UN Report, 2019: 16).

To ensure the protection of civilians and their property, parties to conflict are required to distinguish between civilians and combatants, targeting only legitimate military objectives (Bouvier, 2020: 30). United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has stated, "Conflict-related sexual violence is now widely recognized as a war crime that is preventable and punishable. The United Nations Security Council has played an important role in the past decade by passing successive resolutions that emphasize accountability for perpetrators and services for survivors" (UN, 2019: 2). For example, Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) requires all armed parties to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, including rape. The UN has established focal points for sexual violence to work closely with Resident Coordinators, the United Nations Country Team, and Special Representatives to address sexual violence (United Nations, 2010: 5). Through these efforts, the UN aims to help rape victims achieve justice in the DRC.

Additionally, teams of experts collaborate with the DRC government to combat impunity, and the UN provides support to survivors. As a result of this cooperation, in 2018, the High Military Court of the DRC sentenced Frederic Batumike, a local parliamentarian and militia leader, to life imprisonment for crimes against humanity, including the rape of 39 children in Kavumu between 2013 and 2016. In 2020, the North Kivu provincial court delivered a final judgment against Ntabo Ntaberi Sheka for the mass rape of 387 women and children in Walikale village, eastern DRC, during 96 hours between July and August 2010 (UN News, 2024).

Previous studies have examined women targeted or affected by armed conflict (Goetz & Anderson, 2008), sexual violence in African conflicts (Arieff, 2010), sexual violence during the Rwandan genocide (Rejoice & Jeffrey, 2021), and the impact of conflict on women in the DRC and their response to peacebuilding (Lubunga, 2016). However, empirical evidence exploring women's vulnerability to physical attacks and rape from the civilian perspective has been lacking. This study addresses this gap by analyzing fresh field data to identify vulnerability rates and underlying reasons for such crimes. New insights are thus provided regarding the experiences of women and girls in Goma, eastern DRC, as viewed by civilians.

2 Methodology

The present study was conducted in Goma, the capital city of North Kivu Province. Specifically, the research focused on Goma city as well as the Masisi and Nyiragongo territories. These areas were selected due to the ongoing conflicts in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Although Beni is also located in the east region of the DRC, it was excluded from the study because of the extremely unsafe environment for both respondents and researchers, as documented in a United Nations report (2019:10), which highlights frequent attacks on civilians by militia groups, rebels, and unidentified armed factions. Goma lies on the eastern border of the DRC adjacent to Rwanda, with geographical coordinates of 1° 40' 45" South and 29° 13' 22" East (Vlassenroot and Büscher, 2009:1; Google Satellite Map).

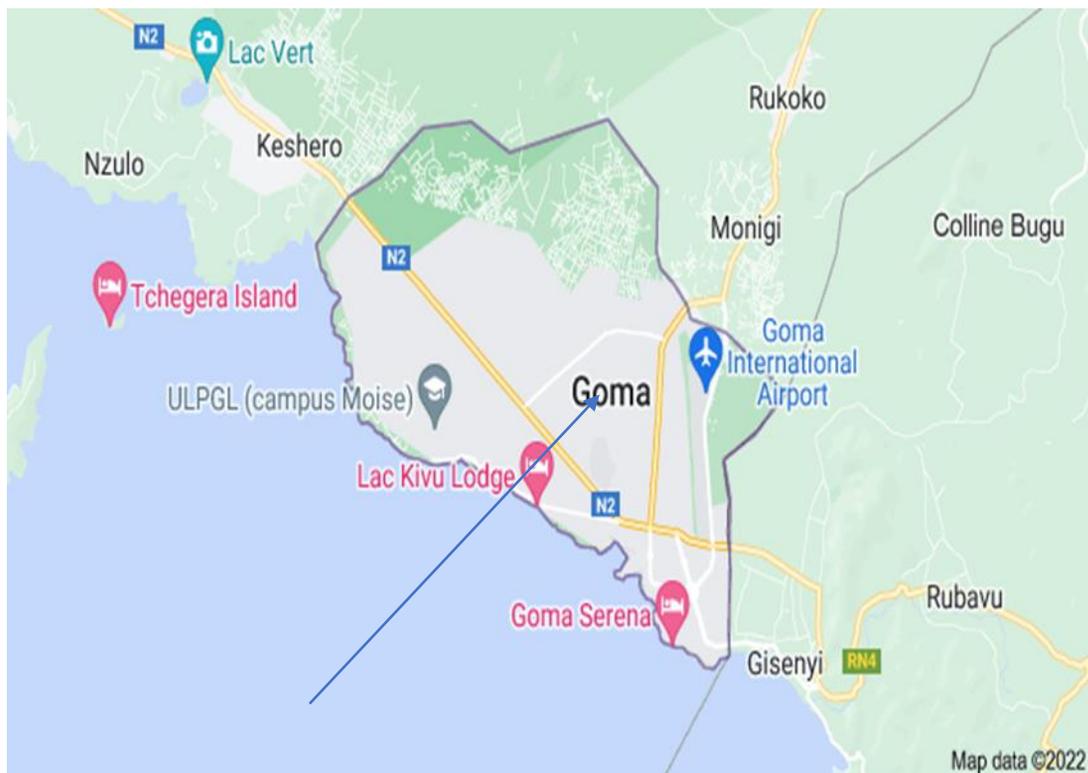


Figure 1: A Map of Goma showing location of a study Area.

Source: Google satellite Map.

—————> Study Area Identification

The study utilized a mixed-methods approach with an exploratory design. This methodology was chosen due to the multifaceted nature of the issue under investigation, which required both qualitative and quantitative data to explore women’s vulnerability to physical attacks and rape (Creswell, 2014: 264). The primary objective was to determine whether the presence of MONUSCO has contributed to an increase, decrease, or stabilization in the incidence of physical attacks and rape during civilian protection efforts.

The exploratory design was selected for its suitability in generating in-depth knowledge within a specific population—women affected by these issues—during a defined period, capturing participants’ perspectives (Bhattacharjee, 2012). Data were gathered from both primary and secondary sources. Respondents included Congolese adults (aged 18 and above, as defined by the DRC constitution) residing in Goma, who had lived in the area before and during the transition from DRC military to MONUC and MONUSCO operations. These

participants were selected for their firsthand knowledge of policy changes and their implementation regarding civilian protection.

Purposive sampling was employed to select key informants and focus group discussion participants, based on traits directly relevant to the study questions—particularly, the impact of MONUSCO's presence on women's vulnerability to physical attacks and rape. Because the overall population size was unknown, snowball sampling was used to identify additional qualitative respondents who met the inclusion criteria. For the survey component, random sampling was utilized to account for the indeterminate population size. In total, 276 respondents with direct or community experience of physical attacks and rape participated in interviews (Bhaltacherjee, 2012: 70).

Qualitative information was collected through in-depth interviews with key informants, including members of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARD), Force Intervention Brigade personnel, medical doctors, NGO representatives, local leaders, women's association leaders, and religious leaders. Interviews continued until thematic saturation was achieved, involving a total of 23 key informants. Additionally, four focus group discussions were conducted, and observational methods were employed for further data collection.

Quantitative data were collected through surveys that included both open-ended and closed-ended questions, enabling the inclusion of a broad range of perspectives. Although data collection for both qualitative and quantitative strands occurred concurrently, the data were analyzed separately. Interviews were conducted in Kiswahili; however, because Congolese Swahili differs from Tanzanian Kiswahili, a translator facilitated communication to ensure clarity. As the researcher was not Congolese, introductions and accompaniment by trusted community elders were arranged, in addition to obtaining official clearance from the University of Dodoma and municipal authorities in Goma, Nyiragongo, and Masisi—ensuring both access and community trust in the study areas.

2.1 Dependent and independent variables

2.1.1 Dependent Variable

Civilians' Protection Based on Physical Attack: This outcome variable was assessed using 15 specific questions. Examples include: whether MONUSCO's escorting of civilians during crises reduced the frequency of physical attacks; whether MONUSCO's provision of basic needs reduced these frequencies; whether MONUSCO's oversight of ceasefire agreement implementation contributed to a reduction in physical attacks; and whether the use of force by MONUSCO led to a decrease in such incidents. Each question offered three response options: Yes (1), No (2), and No idea (3). Responses were then

dichotomized, with “Yes” coded as 1 and all other responses coded as 0. The results were summed to yield a total score ranging from 0 to 15. Respondents scoring above 10 were classified as experiencing adequate civilian protection (coded as 1), while those scoring 10 or below were classified as experiencing inadequate protection (coded as 0).

Civilians’ Protection Based on Rape: This outcome variable was derived from four specific questions assessing whether MONUSCO’s actions—including escorting civilians during crises, provision of basic needs, monitoring the implementation of ceasefire agreements, and the non-use of force during operations—reduced the frequency of rape. Each question had three possible responses: Yes (1), No (2), and No idea (3). Responses were dichotomized such that “Yes” was coded as 1 and all other responses as 0. The scores for the four questions were summed, resulting in a possible range from 0 to 4. Respondents who scored 3 or 4 were coded as 1 and considered to have experienced adequate civilian protection, while those scoring 2 or less were coded as 0 and considered to have experienced inadequate civilian protection.

2.1.2 Independent Variables

The independent variables of all outcomes were demographic characteristic of the respondent like years of residence, marital status, occupation, sex and age of respondent.

2.2 Data Analysis

Data analysis commenced with quantitative data, utilizing SAS (Statistical Analysis System) Version 9.4. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were employed to summarize the data. For inferential analysis, a binary logistic regression model was applied to identify factors associated with civilian protection, specifically in relation to physical attack and rape.

The general logistic regression model is given as:

$$\text{logit}[\pi(x)] = \log\left(\frac{\pi(x)}{1-\pi(x)}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_1 + \dots + \beta_p x_p$$

Where, $\pi(x)$ is the likelihood of civilian protection is “not good”, x_i 's are set of independent variables and β_i 's are their respective parameters. The results of the model are presented in the form of a regression parameter estimate and estimated odds ratios (OR). The estimated OR, determined by taking the exponent of the regression parameter estimates, shows the increase or decrease

in the likelihood of civilian protection in terms of physical attack and rape at a given level of the independent variable as compared to those in the reference category. An estimate of $OR > 1$ indicates that the likelihood of having inadequate civilian protection for respondents at a given level of the independent variable is greater than that for the reference category. Likewise, an estimate of $OR < 1$ specify that the chance of having good outcome at a given level of independent variable is less than that for the reference categories. SAS (Statistical Analysis System) version 9.4 was used for data analysis and significance of all statistical tests was determined at 5% level. Thereafter, qualitative information was analysed by using content analysis in which the items were coded, chosen, placed categorically and detailed analysed (Philipp, 2014: 13-14). The set of themes which are findings from qualitative information on the same themes was discussed to show whether they agree or disagree with the quantitative data.

3 Findings

3.1 *Physical Attack Increase*

Regarding respondents' and participants' perspectives on physical attacks, the findings reveal the following insights through both quantitative data and participant quotations. More than half of the respondents (56.52%) affirmed an increase in physical attacks from 2017 onwards (see Figure 2). The data further indicate that this escalation intensified as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) government approached the 2018 general elections. According to the findings, the period following the defeat of M23 in 2013 up to 2017 was relatively calm in Goma city. However, participants reported that, beginning in 2017, rebel groups—including the Mai-Mai, Nyatura, and other unidentified factions—re-emerged, leading to a deterioration of security conditions.

Participants highlighted several indicators of the rise in physical attacks, such as increased daily attack rates, forced seizure of property in commercial areas, assaults on business vendors by motorcycle bandits, car hijackings, kidnappings, and the taking of hostages for ransom. Additional factors cited included attacks occurring even near MONUSCO camps and when individuals traveled to farms near Virunga National Park. Other contributing factors identified by participants were poverty-driven revenge, hatred, acts of humiliation (such as sexual violence against women to degrade men), unemployment, moral decay, a perceived decline in humanity, government failure to provide security, and MONUSCO's limited presence in urban centers while neglecting remote areas where insecurity is more acute. A key informant (No. 2) observed: "MONUSCO camps are mostly located in town areas like

Goma Ville, airport, Mubambiro, and other areas near Goma city, neglecting the interior areas such as Virunga Park, where physical attacks mostly occur.”

The findings also suggest that political actors’ desire to retain power has contributed to violence, with some politicians allegedly supporting rebel groups to further their ambitions. Furthermore, MONUSCO and its military component, the Force Intervention Brigade, have failed to neutralize armed groups—such as the Ugandan-origin Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), Rwandan-origin Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), and the Front for Patriotic Resistance of Ituri (FRPI)—which continue to operate in the DRC, undermining MONUSCO’s credibility and effectiveness. A key informant (No. 3) supported this perspective:

Attacks have increased due to politicians’ use of rebels to inflict conflict and MONUSCO’s inability to neutralize rebel groups that frequently attack civilians. This has led to mistrust between local communities and MONUSCO. Local communities now resent MONUSCO and express their anger through boycotts and demands for MONUSCO’s withdrawal from the DRC (In-depth Interview, 2021).

Additional participant commentary noted a specific incident in Quarter of 2021, where it was reported that 200 vehicles were burned in Beni in the presence of MONUSCO. Daily killings and physical attacks on civilians occurred in villages near Goma and sometimes even adjacent to MONUSCO camps. Some participants further alleged that MONUSCO peacekeepers and certain government officials have colluded with rebel leaders to profit from illicit mineral trade, exacerbating insecurity in Goma and, most severely, in Beni. One participant lamented that long-term contracts between foreign investors and self-serving national leaders are the root causes of insecurity and poverty in Goma, Beni, and throughout the DRC, leaving civilians to suffer the consequences. Another participant (No. 23) echoed similar sentiments: -

Some government military leaders reportedly collaborate with rebel leaders in the illicit mineral trade, while certain rebel groups are allegedly led by government military figures seeking to destabilize the government for their own political gain. The ongoing conflict in Goma has exacerbated tensions between government and rebel leaders, contributing to widespread hunger among civilians. In these conditions, even basic livestock farming—such as keeping goats, sheep, or poultry—requires hiring private security, an expense that is unaffordable for many residents who struggle to secure three meals a day. Farmers face similar challenges, as insecurity and food scarcity persist; before crops can be harvested and ripened, criminals often steal them. The resulting

insecurity and hunger have contributed to a rise in criminal activities throughout Goma (In-depth interview, November 2021).

Participant No. 23 noted a significant increase in physical attacks, attributing this rise to prolonged conflict. According to the participant, the escalation in violence has contributed to a surge in family-related criminality and the development of destructive behaviors, including murder and acts of revenge among family members. For example, the participant observed that it has become commonplace for family members—such as daughters and brothers, spouses, or even children and parents—to steal from one another, often driven by extreme hunger and deprivation.

These findings are consistent with Amnesty International's 2021 report, which highlights that in eastern DRC, girls and women frequently face attacks and sexual violence while performing domestic chores or working in fields. The report documents that rape is often accompanied or followed by additional violence, including injury, torture, or even murder, sometimes perpetrated in public or in the presence of family members, both during and after periods of conflict (Amnesty International, 2021:3; Alam, 2014:9; Sjoberg, 2016:31).

Respondents further described that attacks commonly occur when individuals venture near Virunga National Park in search of necessities, or while traveling to market centers and areas of business. Additionally, militia groups and bandits frequently invade shops, using firearms to forcibly seize property. Such armed groups may also resort to kidnapping, often injuring their victims to extort ransom payments.

3.2 *Physical Attack Remained the Same*

Over one-third of respondents (36.23%) believed that the frequency of physical attacks has remained unchanged compared to the periods of MONUC and MONUSCO. Respondents in this group noted that, during the MONUC and MONUSCO missions, physical attacks occurred daily and that there has been no significant progress in protecting civilians. Participants further indicated that the transition from MONUC to MONUSCO was perceived as merely a change of name. They asserted that MONUSCO demonstrated no substantial improvement in its capacity to prevent physical attacks, protect civilians, or neutralize rebel groups in the study area. In a similar vein, Participant No. 2 commented on MONUSCO's efforts to reduce physical attacks, stating that: -

There is no substantive difference between MONUC and MONUSCO when it comes to fostering a calm environment or fulfilling their mandate to neutralize rebels and protect civilian lives; the change is merely in the name. These missions have not made significant progress in reducing

physical attacks. With respect to the protection of civilians in the DRC, if it were not for the interference of foreign actors and African collaborators, we believe we could ensure our own security. The United Nations treats the people of the Democratic Republic of Congo as children, while we do not see ourselves that way. We are weary of the persistent intervention and plans of the United Nations in our country (In-depth interview, 2021).

The findings suggest the changes from MONUC to MONUSCO had not added value in civilians' protection in the studied area.

3.3 *Physical Attacks Reduced*

The findings presented in Figure 2 reveal that only 7.25% of respondents believe physical attacks are decreasing. Several participants noted that following the defeat of the M23 group between 2013 and 2017, there was a noticeable reduction in attacks in Goma. This reduction was largely attributed to the joint efforts of MONUSCO and the DRC government. During these collaborative operations, MONUSCO provided logistical support—including vehicles and ammunition—while the Force Intervention Brigade directly assisted the FARDC in combating M23 and protecting civilians. However, it is important to note that respondents did not present concrete evidence to support their perception of decreased physical attacks in Goma. The majority of respondents, representing a combined total of 92.75% (56.52% and 36.23%), indicated that physical attacks remain high and are increasing, in contrast to the minority who perceived a decline.

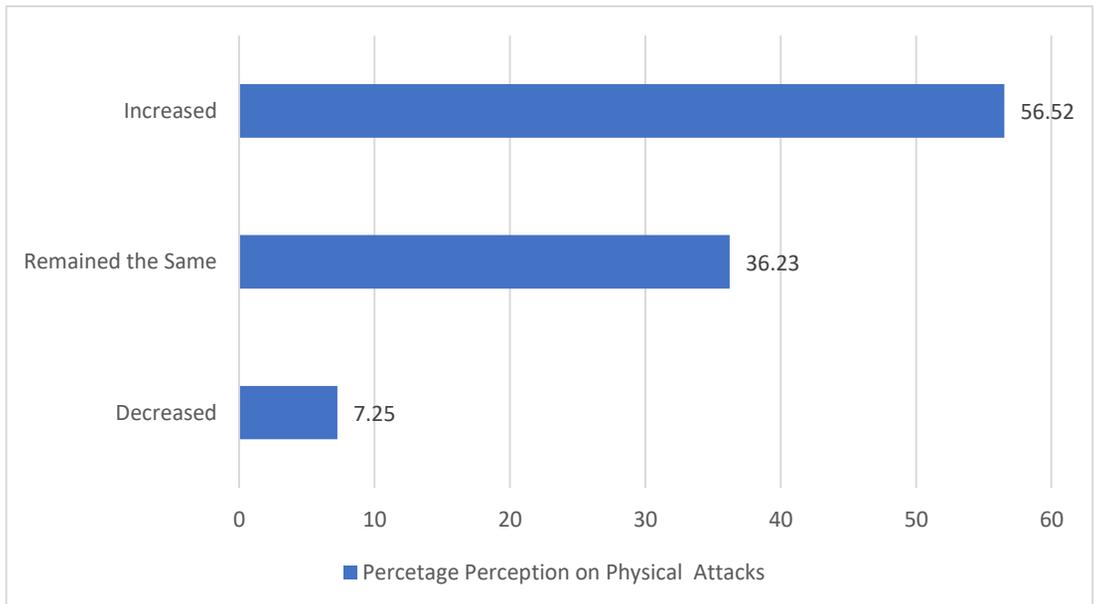


Figure 2: Percentage Perception on Rate of Physical Attacks
Source: Field Survey (2021)

3.4 Rape Cases Increased

In most African countries, individuals convicted of rape face imprisonment for no less than 10 years, with sentences that may be extended to life imprisonment (Ndungu, n.d.). The findings reveal that approximately half of the respondents (51.44%) affirmed that cases of rape have increased, as illustrated in Figure 3. Respondents identified several contributing factors to this rise, including the proliferation of Mai-Mai and other rebel groups, widespread poverty and acts of revenge, the failure of the DRC government to provide adequate security, and the inability of MONUSCO/FIB to effectively protect civilians.

Furthermore, respondents noted that women and girls who have been raped often do not report their cases due to fear of stigma, concern about being ostracized by society, fear of reprisals from perpetrators, and a lack of awareness of their legal rights. These barriers to reporting contribute to the normalization of rape, allowing such cases to multiply and become entrenched in daily life. Three key informants shared similar perspectives, noting: “Some victimized women in Goma, Beni, and other parts of the DRC suffer from trauma that remains unreported; this also affects some men” (In-depth Interview, 2021).

Insights from in-depth interviews further established the increase in rape cases. Key informants attributed the rise to factors such as a lack of commitment from MONUSCO—despite being present in the DRC for over a decade, rape cases have not decreased. Another reason cited was the absence of MONUSCO facilities in high-risk areas, particularly villages near forests and Virunga Park. The continued multiplication of Mai-Mai and other rebel groups in Goma, as well as the DRC government’s inability to protect its citizens, were also highlighted as significant factors. Key Informant No. 13 underscored the seriousness of the situation by referencing statistics as evidence of the rising incidence of rape.

According to available data, 17 health centers in the Masisi-Kirotshe region reported a total of 14,014 rape cases requiring healthcare, including treatment and counseling, between September 2020 and August 2021. Within the health zone of Masisi alone, 7,000 rape cases were documented during the same period. Prior to the arrival of MONUC—later renamed MONUSCO—the annual number of reported cases was substantially lower, with only 10 to 44 cases in Masisi and 7 to 35 cases in the health zone of Masisi centers each year. A key informant further lamented the situation, highlighting the challenges of accurately documenting cases in regions with severe security concerns, such as Beni: “The increase in rape cases is overwhelming, particularly in areas under significant security threat like Beni. Unfortunately, due to the dangerous conditions, collecting reliable information or moving around to verify reports is nearly impossible” (In-Depth Interview, 25 November 2021).

In addition, respondent number 137, a survivor of sexual violence, shared her experience as follows: -

During the volcanic eruption in May 2021, we were fleeing in search of safety. Unfortunately, I was separated from the group and encountered four unknown men who assaulted me. I was raped until I lost consciousness. When I regained consciousness approximately nine hours later, I found myself in a hospital. Following this incident, my husband abandoned our four children. Since then, I have suffered from ongoing health issues and lack the financial means for medical treatment. My children have had to stop attending school because I cannot afford their expenses. I struggle daily to provide for their basic needs, and often it is extremely difficult to meet even the most essential requirements. My life has become unbearable; at times, it feels like a nightmare, yet it is my reality. The physical and emotional wounds, the hardships brought on by conflict, war, and poverty in the Democratic Republic of Congo, are devastating. Our country is rich in resources—minerals, forests, beautiful birds and animals—yet these blessings have become a source of suffering. I pray for healing for our nation, and I call upon African leaders to end selfishness and protect their people.

The findings closely align with the Amnesty International report (2021:3), which documents that in eastern DRC, teenagers and women have been subjected to rape while at home, working on farms, or engaging in their daily routines. Moreover, rape inflicts both psychological and physical harm on victims; in some cases, survivors are subjected to torture or are killed publicly in the presence of family members during or following periods of conflict (Amnesty International, 2021:3; Sjoberg, 2016:31; Alam, 2014:9). Respondents identified several factors contributing to the increase in rape cases, including the rise of Mai-Mai and rebel groups, widespread poverty, acts of revenge, the DRC government's failure to provide adequate security, and the inability of MONUSCO/FIB to effectively protect civilians.

3.5 Rape Cases Remain the Same

Approximately 43.48% of respondents reported that the incidence of rape has remained unchanged, as illustrated in Figure 3. Notably, 95% of civilians surveyed in Goma also indicated that rape cases persist at the same rate. This suggests that incidents of rape continue to occur in Goma despite the presence of MONUSCO in the area. As one key informant (No. 13) observed: -

The presence of MONUSCO benefits only a few. I do not see the importance of MONUSCO being here because the security situation in the DRC, including rape cases, remains alarming. I believe MONUC and MONUSCO have focused more on the prevention of mass killings than on addressing rape and general security concerns. But why? Why should we rely on foreigners for protection? Why are we killing ourselves? Why are we raping our children, sisters, and mothers? (In-depth Interview, November 2021).

Further accounts reveal that women and girls who have been raped experience a wide range of adverse effects, including social discrimination, mental disorders, psychological trauma, and other forms of mistreatment. Many survivors are abandoned by their husbands, which underscores the likely necessity of establishing orphanages. This, in turn, threatens family cohesion and may contribute to the erosion of moral values within the community. Two key informants echoed these concerns, questioning "in the family, the responsibility of child-rearing largely falls to women. It is distressing to consider the future of our nation. Can a woman who has been raped and subsequently ostracized by society properly care for her child, and can that child grow up to be a good citizen?"

The prevalence of rape cases raises the possibility of an increase in orphanages and orphaned children, which could, in turn, foster environments of resentment and revenge, potentially leading to further unethical behavior and insecurity. If orphanages are managed by individuals lacking moral integrity, there is a risk that the cycle of violence, including sexual violence, could perpetuate.

Based on interviews and direct observations of victims, the researcher concludes that the incidence of rape remains high in Goma, as well as in the Masisi and Nyiragongo territories. The recurring tragedy of rape has fundamentally altered the structure of family life in the studied areas, shifting the responsibility of child-rearing from both parents to predominantly single mothers, as many husbands abandon their wives following sexual violence.

3.6 Rape Cases decreased

Comparatively, only 5.07% of respondents indicated that incidents of rape have decreased. According to the findings presented in Figure 3, discussions with Focus Group Discussion (FGD) participants from the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) revealed that the incidence of rape declined after President Félix Tshisekedi assumed office in 2019. The participants agreed that the new administration implemented stringent measures against individuals found guilty of criminal offenses, including rape. As Key Informant No. 7 stated: "Since President Félix Tshisekedi began governing the DRC, reported rape cases have declined compared to the prior regime. The new administration is collaborating closely with MONUSCO to address the issue through community sensitization targeting women and girls, and by strengthening the rule of law and order" (In-Depth Interview, November 2021).

Participants also described the current administration's approach to handling rape cases. Explaining these procedures, Key Informant No. 13 clarified that victims of rape typically report to the coordinator of the 'Do for Women Organization' (Tenda Kwa Wanawake) or the president of the Women's Union (Muungano wa Wamama). Subsequently, victims receive support through Legal Aid. The informant emphasized: -

At a further stage, a representative of Do for Women accompanies the victim to the local chief or community leader, and together they report the case to the police. The group assists in identifying and apprehending the perpetrator. Once the victim identifies the suspect, the police proceed with the arrest and further investigation. The women's leader from Do for Women, along with the victim, then approaches the Dynamics for Women Jurisdiction, which provides a legal expert or advocate to assist in taking the case to court, ensuring the victim's rights are upheld, and justice is served" (In-Depth Interview, December 2021).

Despite the current administration’s efforts, rape cases persist. This persistence may be attributed to the clandestine nature of such crimes, which often occur in hidden or remote environments. If the issue is not urgently addressed, it will impede the socioeconomic progress of both women and men, given their interdependence. Otherwise, only a small segment of men may stand to benefit. Respondents identified several factors contributing to the continued incidence of rape, including the proliferation of Mai-Mai and rebel groups, poverty, acts of revenge, the government’s failure to ensure security, and the inability of MONUSCO/FIB to adequately protect civilians.

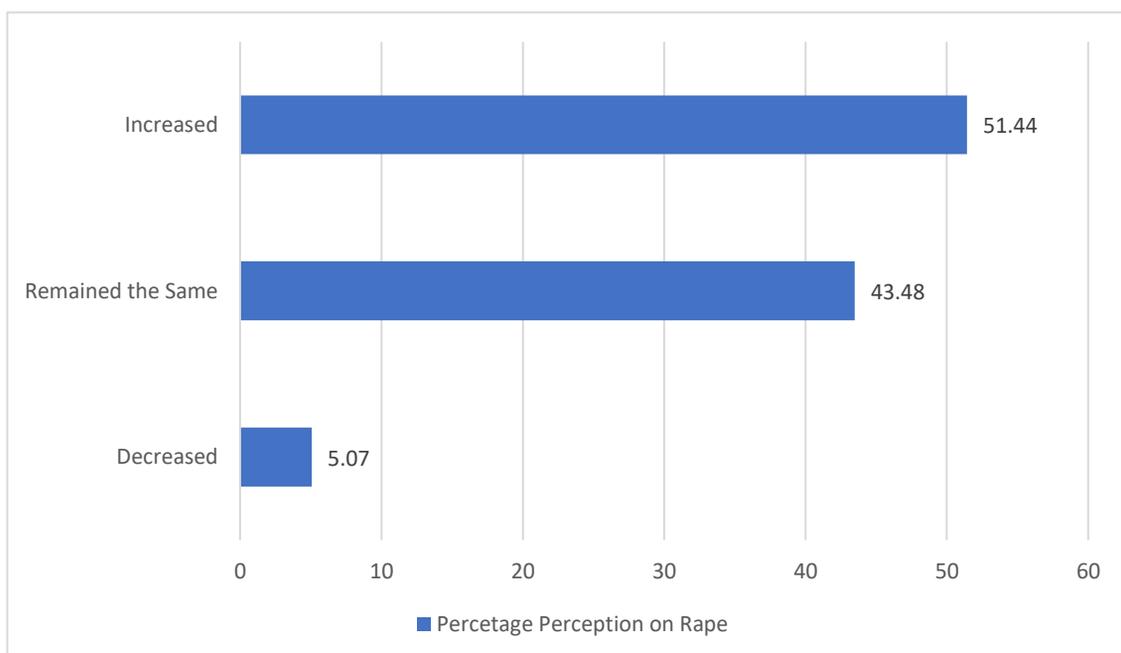


Figure 3: Percentage perception on Rape
 Source: Field Survey, (2021)

4 Association of Demographic with Civilians’ Protection on Physical Attack

4.1 Association with Age

Table 1 presents the results of the binary regression analysis examining the association between respondents’ age and both experiences of physical attacks and the influence of MONUSCO on civilian protection. The analysis indicates a significant association between age and physical attacks. Specifically, respondents aged 41 to 60 were more likely to experience physical attacks

compared to younger individuals (OR = 3.043, $p = 0.0522$). These findings suggest that the risk of physical attack increases with age among the study population.

4.2 Association with Sex

The analysis also reveals a significant association between respondents' sex and experiences of physical attack (see Table 1). Females were found to be more likely than males to encounter unprotected situations and physical attacks (OR = 2.945, $p < 0.0001$). This suggests that women are disproportionately affected by the consequences of conflict and violence. The higher participation of females in the study may reflect their heightened vulnerability. However, this difference did not influence the responses to the survey questions. This is further supported by a key informant, who stated: "...women are exposed more to the danger of physical attacks when going to farms, or to buy their basic needs in dangerous areas near Virunga Park, or when they go into the bush searching for firewood for cooking. These are places where militia groups often hide for their purposes" (In-depth interview, December 2021).

4.3 Association with Occupation

The results demonstrate that respondents who are privately employed or engaged in business are less likely to experience unprotected situations involving physical attacks compared to farmers (OR = 0.338, $p = 0.0012$ for private employees; OR = 0.436, $p = 0.0155$ for business persons). This suggests that individuals involved in farming are at higher risk of physical attacks, likely due to the location of farms in insecure, remote areas away from the city. In the studied area, accessing basic needs, healthcare, and education often exposes farmers to physical attacks, as rebels and other perpetrators typically hide in hard-to-detect locations. Conversely, private employees and business persons may benefit from personal protection and better access to security information. As noted by a key informant: "...farmers are not important for MONUSCO protection, possibly because they live in places with dust and poor housing ... sometimes, I think maybe it is because farmers lack property to offer as gifts to show appreciation to MONUSCO for their work, or I don't know! ... after all, we are all fed up with the so-called MONUSCO; they do their work as if they are forced ... my message to African governments is to stop foreign investment so we can first evaluate the profit or loss we gain from contracts with foreigners. Let us work independently without foreigners" (In-depth interview, December 2021).

4.4 Association of Education

The findings indicate that respondents with a degree-level education were significantly less likely to experience unprotected situations involving physical attacks compared to those with no formal education (OR = 0.154, $p = 0.0049$). This suggests that higher educational attainment is associated with reduced vulnerability to physical attacks. Education appears to play a critical role in enhancing individuals' capacity to make informed decisions regarding their personal security—such as when, where, and how to engage in certain activities to safeguard themselves from potential harm. As asserted by Yonggen (2001), cited in Laurent, K. A. (2023:75), education plays an increasingly vital role in contemporary societies by supporting both national and global efforts to achieve greater security and stability, thereby contributing to a more peaceful environment.

4.5 Association of Marital Status

The analysis further reveals that married respondents were less likely to encounter unprotected situations of physical attack compared to their single counterparts, although this association was not statistically significant (OR = 0.689, $p = 0.1392$). According to a key informant (In-Depth Interview, November 2021), married women often benefit from the presence and support of their husbands when carrying out daily activities, which may offer additional protection from security threats. This aligns with existing literature, which indicates that single mothers may experience emotional distress and a diminished sense of identity due to their status (Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009). Single fathers, on the other hand, may lack robust support networks, financial resources, and assistance in maintaining discipline for their children (Gitonga, 2025). Single individuals are also vulnerable to challenges such as loneliness, trauma, unhealthy eating habits, and clinical depression (Kotwal, 2009; Gitonga, 2025). These factors can undermine both the well-being of single parents and their children, and may negatively affect confidence in decision-making.

4.6 Association of Years of Residence

Respondents who had lived in the study area for 31–40 years or 41–60 years were less likely to experience unprotected situations involving physical attacks compared to those who had resided there for 30 years or less, although these associations were not statistically significant (OR = 0.721, $p = 0.4760$ and OR = 0.905, $p = 0.8393$, respectively). Conversely, individuals who had lived in the area for more than 60 years were more likely to report unprotected situations of physical attack (OR = 1.647, $p = 0.4827$).

Table 1: Binary Logistic Analysis for factors Associated with Civilians' Protection based on Physical Attack

Variable	Unprotected N (%)	Protected N (%)	Logistic regression OR [95%CI]	p-value
Age of the respondent				
18-40	92(62.16)	56(37.84)	Ref	
41-60	64(61.54)	40(38.46)	0.974[0.581, 1.632]	0.9200
61 and above	20(83.33)	4(16.67)	3.043[0.989, 9.362]	0.0522
Sex of the respondent				
Male	42(46.67)	48(53.33)	Ref	
Female	134(72.04)	52(27.96)	2.945[1.744, 4.970]	<.0001
Occupation				
Farmer	62(75.61)	20(24.39)	Ref	
Government employee	24(85.71)	4(14.29)	1.935[0.599, 6.249]	0.2697
Private employed	44(51.16)	42(48.84)	0.338[0.175, 0.652]	0.0012
Business person	46(57.50)	34(42.50)	0.436[0.223, 0.854]	0.0155
Education				
None	13(76.47)	4(23.53)	Ref	
Primary	41(71.93)	16(28.07)	0.788[0.223,2.782]	0.7118
Secondary	78(70.91)	32(29.09)	0.750[0.227,2.475]	0.6367
Diploma	31(58.49)	22(41.51)	0.434[0.125,1.508]	0.1889
Degree	13(33.33)	26(66.67)	0.154[0.042,0.566]	0.0049
Marital status				
Single	92(68.15)	43(31.85)	Ref	
Married	84(59.57)	57(40.43)	0.689[0.420, 1.129]	0.1392
Years of residence				
≤30	17(68.00)	8(32.00)	Ref	
31-40	95(60.51)	62(39.49)	0.721[0.293, 1.772]	0.4760
41-60	50(65.79)	26(34.21)	0.905[0.345, 2.375]	0.8393
61-above	14(77.78)	4(22.22)	1.647[0.409, 6.634]	0.4827

Source: Field Survey, 2021

5 Association of Demographic with Civilians' Protection on Rape

5.1 Association of Sex

The analysis revealed a significant association between sex and the likelihood of experiencing unprotected incidents of rape. Specifically, females were found to be significantly more likely than males to experience such situations (OR = 6.522, $p < .0001$; see Table 2). This finding aligns with the assertion by Major General Patrick Cammaert, former Deputy Force Commander in the DRC, who observed

that “it is more dangerous to be a woman than to be a soldier right now in Eastern DRC” (UNDOCS, 2008:2). The results are consistent with existing literature (Lubanga, 2016; Woldetsadik, 2018), which documents that women are disproportionately affected by rape and physical attacks in conflict zones such as Bosnia, Rwanda, Northern Uganda, and Yugoslavia. This vulnerability may be attributed, at least in part, to biological and sociocultural factors that limit women’s capacity for self-defense during such violations.

A key informant (No. 11) provided further insight, stating: “Many people in DRC, and possibly in other countries, regard women as being created only for sexual intercourse, to attract men, and, because women are not as biologically strong as men, they are more easily raped. ...it is not good. God will punish the rapists.” (In-depth interview, December 2021).

The Rwandan genocide further exemplifies the prevalence and brutality of sexual violence, with widespread reports of rape occurring in public spaces such as highways, farms, offices, hospitals, and places of worship (Rejoice1 & Jeffrey, 2021). Garrido (2021) similarly notes that, in armed conflicts—particularly in African countries—sexual violence predominantly targets women and children, while men are often positioned as perpetrators. The psychological, physical, and socioeconomic consequences of such violence are profound, as highlighted by Woldetsadik (2018), who found that over 30% of women in the Great Lakes region have reported experiencing some form of conflict-related sexual violence, including forced marriage, rape, or forced pregnancy.

These findings underscore the urgent need for the DRC government and MONUSCO to strengthen protective measures for women, ensuring their right to live peacefully and without fear. Failure to do so perpetuates the cycle of victimization and contributes to broader social and economic challenges, including reduced female participation in productive activities and the perpetuation of poverty.

The study also found that, due to stigma and fear of ostracization, many female victims—especially those in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps—do not report incidents of rape. This is corroborated by Swaine (2018), who documented both collective and individual acts of sexual violence in camp settings, and noted that girls who became pregnant due to rape were sometimes subjected to further harm or even death. The resulting psychological trauma and long-term suffering are considerable, as reflected in a respondent’s harrowing account of being raped alongside her daughters by armed men, resulting in the loss and ongoing trauma of her children (Respondent No. 101, November 2021).

Further, the study observed that survivors of rape are often abandoned by their spouses and left solely responsible for their children. Social humiliation and community rejection frequently deter women from reporting such cases, a phenomenon also reported in Northern Uganda by Woldetsadik (2018). Victims of rape suffer not only physically and psychologically but also economically and

socially. The repercussions extend to increased numbers of street children, recruitment into armed groups, deprivation of basic needs, and decreased school attendance. Globally, conflict-related violence against women includes murder, injury, torture, imprisonment, abduction, forced prostitution, displacement, and impoverishment (Aroussi, 2016).

5.2 Association of Occupation

The study found that respondents who were business persons or privately employed were significantly less likely to experience unprotected situations of rape compared to farmers (OR = 0.288, $p = 0.0026$; OR = 0.321, $p = 0.0056$, respectively). These findings suggest that targeted protection efforts by MONUSCO are necessary in insecure areas such as those near Virunga National Park and business centers, as well as in villages surrounded by bushland, to ensure civilians can safely engage in livelihood activities.

5.3 Association of Marital Status

Married respondents were significantly less likely to experience unprotected situations of rape compared to single respondents (OR = 0.420, $p = 0.0038$). This suggests that single individuals are at greater risk and may have less freedom of movement or protection compared to their married counterparts. One key informant (No. 2, December 2021) explained: "Some people rape due to superstitious beliefs, such as gaining luck from having intercourse with virgins. Others do it to humiliate married women and their husbands, to cause family disunity, or simply for personal satisfaction after living in isolation. Unmarried women are more frequently targeted because they are perceived as more accessible."

5.4 Association of Years of Residence

Respondents who had resided in the study area for 41–60 years were significantly more likely to experience unprotected situations of rape compared to those with less than 30 years' residence (OR = 2.952, $p = 0.0318$). Similarly, those who had lived there for 31–40 years had higher odds (OR = 2.412, $p = 0.0514$), though this was not statistically significant. This may be due to victims being well known to local perpetrators, who may target women for their perceived wealth, status, or as acts of revenge. Older residents, particularly those over 61, are especially vulnerable due to their age and diminished capacity for self-defense, as illustrated by the account of a 75-year-old rape survivor. In summary, the findings highlight the intersection of gender, occupation, marital status, and duration of residence as significant factors influencing vulnerability

to rape in conflict-affected areas. Addressing these risks requires coordinated efforts to enhance protection, reduce stigma, and support survivors, thereby breaking the cycle of violence and its far-reaching consequences.

Table 2: Binary Logistic Analysis for factors Associated with Civilians' Protection based on Rape.

Variable	Unprotected N (%)	Protected N (%)	Logistic regression OR [95%CI]	p-value
Age of the respondent				
18-40	110(74.32)	38(25.68)	Ref	
41-60	86(82.69)	18(17.31)	1.651[0.881, 3.092]	0.1177
61 and above	16(66.67)	8(33.33)	0.691[0.274, 1.743]	0.4335
Sex of the respondent				
Male	48(53.33)	42(46.67)	Ref	
Female	164(88.17)	22(11.83)	6.522[3.551, 11.97]	<.0001
Occupation				
Farmer	72(87.80)	10(12.20)	Ref	
Government employee	26(92.86)	2(7.14)	1.806[0.371, 8.792]	0.4644
Private employed	60(69.77)	26(30.23)	0.321[0.143, 0.717]	0.0056
Business person	54(67.50)	26(32.50)	0.288[0.128, 0.649]	0.0026
Marital status				
Single	114(84.44)	21(15.56)	Ref	
Married	98(69.50)	43(30.50)	0.420[0.233, 0.755]	0.0038
Years of residence				
≤30	15(60.00)	10(40.00)	Ref	
31-40	123(78.34)	34(21.66)	2.412[0.995, 5.848]	0.0514
41-60	62(81.58)	14(18.42)	2.952[1.099, 7.931]	0.0318
61-above	12(66.67)	6(33.33)	1.333[0.376, 4.725]	0.6558

Source: Field Survey, 2021

6 Conclusion

This study reveals complex and evolving trends regarding physical attacks and rape in Goma and the surrounding areas. While the prevalence of both types of violence remains alarmingly high, the findings present a nuanced picture: Quantitative data indicate persistently elevated rates of physical attacks and rape. For example, one key informant highlighted a significant increase in reported rape cases in Masisi and Kirotshe, with 14,014 cases documented from September 2020 to August 2021, compared to a pre-MONUSCO average of 10–44 cases annually. Similarly, the Masisi Centre health zone received approximately 7,000 rape cases for medical care during the same period, a stark

rise from previous years, which saw only 7–35 cases annually. These incidents predominantly occur in remote areas, near Virunga National Park, and in isolated farms where women and girls often go to access basic needs. Qualitative insights from focus group discussions with the Force Intervention Brigade suggest that joint efforts by MONUSCO and the DRC government have resulted in a 23% reduction in physical attacks. Interviews with DRC government soldiers attribute this decline to President Felix Tshisekedi's policy of strict punitive measures against perpetrators. Despite these efforts, the study concludes that physical attacks and rape occur daily in Goma, with women and girls remaining disproportionately vulnerable. The consequences for survivors are severe, extending beyond immediate physical harm to include long-term health and social challenges during and after periods of conflict. Therefore, safeguarding women and girls must be prioritized in Goma and other conflict-affected regions. The study recommends further research to enhance security in vulnerable areas, such as farms near Virunga Park and marketplaces, to ensure safer access for women and girls seeking necessities. It also calls for gender-sensitive action research led by women with strong listening and investigative skills from diverse backgrounds, enabling them to advocate more effectively for survivors at the international level and contribute to conflict resolution processes. Additionally, there is a need for widespread moral education campaigns to address the underlying factors contributing to these issues. The study urges the United Nations to commission policy-oriented action research to improve responses to rape and physical attacks. Furthermore, it recommends research involving the DRC government to explore the social dynamics that lead men to abandon family responsibilities, a factor that exacerbates the vulnerability of children to militia recruitment and places undue burdens on women. Addressing these root causes is essential for fostering a safer and more equitable future for women and girls in eastern DRC.

7 Author Biographies

Dr. Adventina Kahinga Laurent is a distinguished researcher and consultant at the Tanzania Regional Immigration Training Academy (TRITA) in Moshi, Tanzania. Her scholarly interests and publications focus on issues related to refugees and national security, gender studies, and the agricultural value supply chain. Dr. Laurent holds a PhD in International Relations with a specialization in Refugee Studies from the University of Dodoma. She also earned an MBA in Supply Chain Management from Coventry University in the UK and a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism (with a focus on Public Relations) from the University of Iringa in Tanzania. Additionally, she holds a Diploma in International Relations and Diplomacy from the Centre for Foreign Relations (CFR) in Tanzania.

Dr. Faustine Mulokozi Kashumba is a lecturer in Development Studies at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Dodoma, Tanzania. His research interests and publications focus on agricultural transformation, gender, livelihood promotion, and rural development.

Dr. Joseph Kahimba is a distinguished lecturer in Development Studies at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Dodoma, Tanzania. He earned his Doctorate from the University of Dar es Salaam, where he also completed his earlier academic training, obtaining a Bachelor of Arts in Education (BA ED) and a Master of Arts in Development Studies. Dr. Kahimba is an accomplished researcher with published journal articles focusing on the governance of water resources, education policy, and social welfare for the elderly.

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I, Adventina K. Laurent, as the first author, hereby formally declare that Maria Emanuel Manda was a PhD candidate at the University of Dodoma (UDOM). Maria who was my closest friend, sadly passed away on 28 May 2024 during her doctoral studies. The data presented in this publication were collected by her in Goma, Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), between November and December 2021. In recognition of her significant contribution to knowledge and the value of sharing scholarly work, it was deemed important to publish her data posthumously. Rest in peace, Maria—our beloved mother, wife, irreplaceable friend, and an exceptional woman.

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