

Military spouses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: **experiences of navigating institutional gaps in militarized communities**

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Abstract

Military spouses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo occupy an ambiguous position between civilian and military spheres, limiting their access to both military welfare and civilian assistance. Based on qualitative research (2023–2024) in three FARDC camps in South Kivu, including focus groups with over 100 spouses and interviews with reform actors, this brief examines how institutional arrangements shape their daily lives. Findings show a gap between legal provisions and reality. Although military laws guarantee housing, healthcare, and allowances, these are rarely implemented. Spouses instead rely on informal economies and survival strategies, reflecting 'double exclusion' from both military and civilian systems. Gender norms shift social protection responsibilities onto women, whose contributions remain unrecognized. These challenges intensify during crises such as deployment, injury, or death. The brief argues that military family welfare is essential to security sector reform. Strengthening legal implementation and improving coordination can reduce precarity, enhance military legitimacy, and support broader social stability.

Introduction

Military families play an essential but often overlooked role in the functioning of armed forces in conflict-affected contexts. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), spouses of soldiers in the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) form a central part of the social and economic life of military camps, yet their position remains institutionally ambiguous.

Although military legislation formally recognizes soldiers' families as beneficiaries of welfare provisions, military spouses often struggle to access these rights in practice. This gap between legal entitlement and lived reality produces what can be described as institutionally produced precarity, where vulnerability emerges not simply from poverty or conflict but from institutional arrangements that fail to deliver promised protections.

This brief draws on qualitative research conducted between 2023 and 2024 in three FARDC camps in South Kivu. The research was funded by Folke Bernadotte Academy and carried out by researchers affiliated with the *Centre d'Excellence Denis Mukwege* at the Evangelical University of Africa in Bukavu, South Kivu. The findings are based on focus group discussions with more than 100 military spouses and interviews with actors involved in security sector reform and peacebuilding programming. The research explores how military spouses manage everyday life within militarized environments, which may be shaped by economic challenges, infrastructural constraints, and varying levels of institutional support.

The experiences of military wives illustrate how certain populations fall outside existing protection frameworks. Understanding the situation of military families is therefore important not only for social policy but also for broader debates on security sector reform, civil–military relations, and gender within military institutions.

Research findings

Formal rights rarely translate into actual support

The legal framework governing the FARDC formally provides welfare provisions for military personnel and their families. The 2013 law on the status of military personnel guarantees benefits such as family allowances, housing, healthcare, and pensions.[1] However, evidence from the field indicates that these provisions are rarely implemented in practice. Participants consistently described a gap between formal entitlements and everyday realities.

Housing provides a clear example of the gap between formal entitlements and everyday realities. Although Congolese military legislation guarantees accommodation for military personnel and their families,[2] military spouses described a system where housing is obtained through informal arrangements rather than through official allocation procedures. When families arrive in a camp, they often take over the residence of a departing household and may be expected to compensate the previous occupants for the structure. In practice, this creates a small informal housing market within the camps, where access to shelter depends on personal negotiations rather than institutional support.

The quality of housing varies widely. Many shelters are constructed from temporary materials such as wood, tarpaulins, or recycled metal sheets, and offer limited protection from heavy rain and flooding. In some camps, newly arrived families may initially stay in communal structures or hangars until they can construct their own shelter. Women described situations where leaking roofs and flooded floors forced families to move belongings or children to dry areas during the rainy season.

Healthcare access follows a similar pattern. While military regulations promise medical services for soldiers and their families,[3] the medical infrastructure available within many camps remains extremely limited. Camp dispensaries often lack essential medicines, equipment, and trained personnel, and are typically able to provide only basic treatments such as painkillers or malaria medication. Women reported that pregnant mothers and patients with more serious conditions are frequently referred to civilian health facilities outside the camp; structures many women would not afford to seek care at.

As a result, families frequently bear the financial and practical burden of healthcare despite the existence of formal guarantees of medical support. Participants described situations where households were forced to take loans or withdraw children from school in order to pay hospital costs. These experiences illustrate how welfare provisions for military families often remain symbolic rather than operational, leaving spouses to absorb the practical consequences of institutional gaps and forced to rely on informal arrangements and personal coping strategies. These findings reflect broader research showing that many FARDC soldiers and their families belong to the poorest segments of the population despite their association with state institutions.[4]

1 GoDRC (2013), Journal officiel: "Loi n° 13/005 portant statut du militaire des Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo".
2 GoDRC (2013), Journal officiel: "Loi n° 13/005 portant statut du militaire des Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo", article 132.
3 GoDRC (2013), Journal officiel: "Loi n° 13/005 portant statut du militaire des Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo", article 134, article 136.
4 Eriksson Baaz, M., and Stern, M. (2008) Making Sense of Violence: Voices of Soldiers in the Congo (DRC), *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 1, pp. 57-86; Kabengele Kalonji E., Kadda C., Milemba G., Mukala J., Mutiti M, and Tshimbalanga A., (2021), "L'état des lieux de la réforme de l'armée et le rôle d e la société civile dans la supervision du secteur de la défense en République Démocratique du Congo (RDC)", ASSN.

Military spouses live between civilian and military worlds

Military spouses occupy a socially and institutionally ambiguous position. Participants frequently described themselves as civilians who simply happened to marry soldiers. Yet their association with the military profoundly shapes how they are perceived and treated by both institutions and surrounding communities.

Civilian systems often do not recognize military spouses as eligible beneficiaries of assistance. Participants noted that international humanitarian and development organizations rarely operate inside military camps and that military spouses are often considered outside the scope of assistance programs. In many cases, organizations explicitly argued that military families fall under the responsibility of the armed forces rather than civilian support systems. Similarly, civilian communities often perceive military families as part of the military establishment rather than as civilians. Participants described frequent tensions between military and civilian populations living around the camps, particularly in situations where resources such as water, food, or employment opportunities are scarce. Some women reported being insulted or stigmatized by civilians because of their association with the military, including being called *maibobo* (a term referring to street children or beggars). Others explained that civilians sometimes accused military families of being privileged or connected to state power, even though their everyday living conditions are often marked by poverty and insecurity.

Within the military structure, spouses are rarely recognized as institutional actors in their own right. Their relationship with the military is mediated through their husbands' rank and status, and access to benefits or support typically depends on these hierarchies rather than on formal entitlements. Several women expressed the view that the military "recognizes only the soldier," while wives and children remain largely invisible within the institution's welfare structures.

This ambiguous social position has practical consequences for everyday life. Participants described situations where they felt unwelcome or distrusted outside the camps, yet lacked full recognition or protection within military structures. Previous research describes this condition as "liminality," where military spouses live at the boundary between civilian and military spheres.[5] In such contexts, individuals may simultaneously belong to both worlds while being fully recognized by either one of them.

As a result, military spouses frequently fall between institutional mandates. While military authorities expect civilian actors to provide social support services, humanitarian and development organizations often consider military families outside their eligibility frameworks. This institutional ambiguity leaves military spouses facing what can be described as double exclusion: marginal within military welfare systems and largely invisible within civilian assistance structures.

Gendered norms

Military institutions often rely on an idealized model of militarized masculinity in which soldiers are expected to act as household providers and protectors.[6] In practice, however, the economic realities of military life frequently contradict this expectation. Women consistently reported that soldiers' salaries are extremely low and

5 Eriksson Baaz, M., & Verweijen, J. (2017). The agency of liminality: army wives in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the tactical reversal of militarization. *Critical Military Studies*, 3(3), 267–286

6 Eriksson Baaz, M., and Stern, M. (2008) Making Sense of Violence: Voices of Soldiers in the Congo (DRC), *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 1, pp. 57-86

often paid with delays, making it difficult for families to meet even basic needs. In many discussions, women mentioned monthly salaries ranging between approximately 60 and 100 USD, which must cover housing, food, school fees, healthcare, and other household expenses.

As a result, military spouses frequently assume responsibility for sustaining their families. Women described engaging in a wide range of informal livelihood activities, including washing clothes for others, carrying sand, selling small goods in local markets, performing domestic labor, or cultivating small agricultural plots where land is available. These activities are often physically demanding and poorly paid but remain essential for household survival. Participants also explained that economic insecurity often forces families into cycles of debt. Many women described borrowing money from informal lenders, sometimes referred to as "Lambert banks," which charge extremely high interest rates. While some women participate in informal savings groups, these arrangements do not always provide sufficient protection against debt accumulation. In several cases, women reported that medical expenses or school fees forced them to take loans that became difficult to repay.

These survival strategies reflect what many women referred to as *débrouillardisme*, a form of everyday improvisation necessary to survive in contexts where institutional support is weak or absent. However, for military spouses, *débrouillardisme* takes on a distinct character. Unlike many civilian households, military families are formally entitled to state-provided welfare through military legislation, yet these provisions remain largely unimplemented. As a result, their reliance on informal strategies does not simply stem from general conditions of poverty or weak governance, but from a specific form of institutional failure within a structure that ostensibly guarantees support. While these practices demonstrate considerable resilience and resourcefulness, they also reveal how responsibilities for social protection are effectively shifted from institutions to households. In practice, military wives sustain both their families and the functioning of military communities through unpaid and informal labor, even though they remain largely unrecognized within formal military welfare structures.

Institutional neglect becomes most visible during crises

The consequences of institutional precarity become particularly visible when soldiers are injured, deployed, or killed. Women described situations in which wives were responsible for caring for wounded husbands without adequate institutional support. When soldiers returned from operations injured, spouses often became their primary caregivers, accompanying them to hospitals, managing medical treatments, and covering healthcare costs. In several cases, women explained that the financial burden of treatment fell on the household despite the existence of formal guarantees of medical care for military personnel.

Widowhood represents an even more acute form of institutional vulnerability. Women reported that widows frequently face prolonged delays or administrative barriers when attempting to access pensions or death benefits guaranteed under military law.[7] Several women described waiting years for compensation following the death of their husbands, while others reported receiving no support at all. During this period, widows often assume sole responsibility for household survival and childcare while continuing to navigate the same economic constraints described by other military spouses.

7 GoDRC (2013), Journal officiel: "Loi n° 13/005 portant statut du militaire des Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo", article 206.

Such economic and social challenges are not unique to military widows in the DRC where many widows in civilian contexts similarly face poverty, limited social protection, and barriers to inheritance or support. However, military widows encounter a distinct form of precarity. Their vulnerability is shaped not only by loss of income, but by the non-fulfilment of formal state obligations explicitly guaranteed through military legislation. In this sense, their marginalization reflects a breakdown of an institutional contract rather than solely the absence of support.

Such dynamics are also observed beyond the DRC. Research on military families in other contexts highlights how militaries may function as "non-caring institutions," where welfare systems fail to adequately support families affected by conflict or military service.[8] These dynamics are particularly pronounced in fragile institutional contexts where welfare provisions exist in legislation but remain weakly implemented. In eastern DRC, protests by military widows in recent years have drawn public attention to the issue. Widows have publicly demanded the payment of delayed pensions and compensation following the deaths of soldiers, highlighting the gap between formal promises of state support and the lived realities of military families.[9] These protests reflect broader frustrations among military households regarding the lack of institutional recognition and protection.

8 Ajala, F., & Heinecken, L. (2025). The Military As a Non-Caring Institution: A Case Study of Nigerian Military Widows of the Boko Haram Conflict. *Armed Forces & Society*, 0(0).

9 Loika, M. (2025), RDC : les veuves des militaires réclament leur pension, in DW 04/06/2025, URL: https://www.dw.com/fr/rdc-pension-femmes-veuves-militaires-bunia-ituri/a-72788719

Conclusions and implications

The experiences of military spouses highlight broader challenges in governance and social protection in conflict-affected states. First, they reveal limitations in humanitarian and development assistance frameworks. As research on humanitarian governance has shown, vulnerability categories often determine who receives assistance, leaving groups outside predefined categories invisible.[10] Military spouses, positioned at the intersection of civilian and military spheres, are frequently excluded on the assumption that their needs fall under the responsibility of the armed forces, even when military support systems are insufficient or non-functional.

Second, the findings demonstrate how vulnerability can be institutionally produced rather than simply resulting from poverty or conflict. Scholars have previously distinguished between universal human vulnerability and precarity, which refers to the unequal distribution of protection and support across populations.[11] In the case of military spouses in the DRC, formal legal provisions exist, but access to these protections is uneven and often mediated through informal practices, resulting in a form of vulnerability that is structurally produced rather than incidental.

Third, neglecting military families has implications for security sector reform and military legitimacy. The findings suggest that the everyday living conditions of military households directly affect the well-being and morale of soldiers. When families struggle to access basic services such as healthcare, education, and housing, this places additional pressure on military personnel and can undermine institutional cohesion. In practice, this may lead soldiers to seek alternative means of supporting their families, including informal income-generating activities or predatory practices, which can weaken discipline and strain relations with civilian populations. Addressing the needs of military families should therefore be understood not only as a social policy concern but also as a critical component of effective and sustainable security sector reform.

10 Mendola, D. & Pera, A. (2022), Vulnerability of refugees: some reflections on definitions and measurement practices, International migration, 60:108-121. ; Olivius, E. (2016), Refugee Men as Perpetrators, Allies or Troublemakers? Emerging Discourses on Men and Masculinities in Humanitarian Aid. Women's Studies International Forum 56: 56–65; Ticktin, M. (2011), Casualties of Care: Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France (1st ed). University of California Press.

11 Butler, J. (2004), Precarious Life: The powers of mourning and violence. London: Verso.

Policy Recommendations

- **Improve coordination to support military families in and around camps**
  Humanitarian and development organizations should explore mechanisms to support military spouses and their children living in military camps, particularly regarding healthcare, education, and gender-based violence services. This support must be coordinated with military institutions, which retain primary responsibility for military families, to ensure complementarity, access, and accountability.

- **Integrate military family welfare into security sector reform**
  Security sector reform programs should explicitly address the welfare of military families. Improving living conditions and access to services for military families can strengthen institutional legitimacy and improve morale among military personnel.

- **Strengthen implementation of existing legal protection**
  Authorities and partners should ensure transparent implementation through stronger accountability, including monitoring, fair benefit allocation, and accessible grievance mechanisms. Better coordination is needed to translate legal provisions into effective and equitable support.

- **Support livelihood opportunities for military spouses**
  Livelihood support should reflect the specific realities of military spouses, including insecure environments, and limited access to land, markets, and capital. Programs should build on existing informal activities (such as petty trade and small-scale agriculture), while facilitating safer market access and collective approaches like savings groups.

- **Strengthen gender perspectives within military governance reforms**
  Gender-sensitive reforms should address structural inequalities and ensure spouses' independent access to services such as healthcare, housing, and allowances. This includes improving gender-responsive services, particularly maternal healthcare and GBV support. Targeted livelihood support and recognition of unpaid care roles are also essential.

- **Ensure participation of military families in policy development**
  Policies should actively involve military spouses in design and implementation to reflect lived realities. Strengthening consultation mechanisms, such as camp-level committees, can enhance inclusion. Meaningful participation improves accountability, policy effectiveness, and trust between families and military institutions.

Author Biographies

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