

Review - Equal Opportunity Peacekeeping

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MATTHEW KEARNS, AUG 28 2017

Equal Opportunity Peacekeeping
by Sabrina Karim and Kyle Beardsley
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017

The question of how the integration of gender into peacekeeping operations and practices might provoke the reconstitution of masculinities and their relationship to military identity has been central to critical debates within gender and international relations scholarship. Sabrina Karim and Kyle Beardsley make a highly significant contribution to these debates by asking, at a time where the importance of gender to peacekeeping is increasingly recognised, how successful existing reforms have been at disrupting the power relations which entrench gender inequalities and make possible the privileging of men and masculinity. In this sense the contribution of the book is twofold; it both offers an assessment of existing reforms while also developing an empirically-driven account of the conditions through which a truly equal opportunity peacekeeping might be enabled.

In offering such an analysis, the book commences from the feminist premise that existing peacekeeping operations (PKO's) are shaped by gender power imbalances, in which military and police institutions "project and replicate structures of power that privilege men and certain forms of masculinity" (p.3). The book therefore explores the conditions through which this might change by analysing existing gender-based reforms in PKO's and data pertaining to the prevalence of discrimination, essentialist assumptions about the role of female peacekeepers and sexual exploitation, abuse, harassment and violence (SEAHV). It also develops the UN mission in Liberia (UNMIL) as a case study for its analysis.

It is important to note here, before turning to the key arguments made by the book, that its analysis is essentially positivist. The authors rely primarily upon extensive quantitative analysis to test the manifestations of gender power imbalances within PKO's. This is notable as feminist IR is generally cautious of quantifying gender or gender inequalities, preferring to concentrate upon how the socially constructed nature of gender is negotiated within international institutions and practices to identify possibilities for disruption or change (Ackerly *et al.*, 2006). Karim and Beardsley offer a brief discussion of this approach, arguing positivist analysis can complement this critical scholarship by revealing how "different types of data comport with our theoretical expectations" (p.5), bringing feminist analysis into conversation with the wider peacekeeping literature which has refused to take gender seriously. Greater elucidation of this argument would have been helpful, as more overtly acknowledging the (often productive) tensions present within feminist scholarship, not least in the different ways they conceptualise gender, would support Karim and Beardsley's aim of revealing the synergies between these different approaches and their empirical observations. Implicit within the book is however the recognition that gender and IR research is "at its best when it is multimethod, epistemologically pluralist, multisited and carefully navigates these differences" (Sjoberg *et al.*, 2017, p. 2).

A major strength of the book is its robust empirical analysis of a wide variety of qualitative and quantitative data sources through which it demonstrates the limitations of existing reforms of gender and peacekeeping. The key argument advanced by the book is that although existing efforts in relation to gender mainstreaming have had some success, their impact has been blunted significantly by structural gender inequalities that limit the role of female peacekeepers and their ability to effect meaningful change. This is demonstrated in Chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 4

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analyses country motivations for contributing female peacekeepers and critically to which missions they were actually sent, revealing women are less likely to be sent to missions that experience high levels of conflict-related violence and SEAHV. In this sense, essentialist assumptions about where it is appropriate for women to deploy, as well as the privileging of a warrior masculinity, curtails the role of female peacekeepers. Chapter 5 explores how gender power imbalances effect the prevalence of SEAHV within missions, identifying the limitations of relying solely upon increasing the number of female peacekeepers to reduce levels of SEAHV. Chapters 6 and 7 turn specifically to UNMIL to explore qualitative data about female peacekeeper's experiences which works to compliment the earlier quantitative analysis, demonstrating how women are marginalised within missions and relegated to largely safe spaces.

Through this rich empirical analysis, which combines quantitative data with the voices of female peacekeepers and their experiences, Karim and Beardsley call for what they term an equal opportunity framework which can provoke the "holistic, cultural shift" (p.26) necessary to overcome these barriers to change. Such a framework embraces actions which "change the gendered nature or culture" (p.55) of PKO's, alert to how changes in structures and behaviours can re-shape the relationship between gender and peacekeeping in ways which promote equality. Chapter 7 is helpful here in developing this argument through its assessment of gender power imbalances in the Liberian National Police Force. While finding discrimination is still prevalent, the authors find evidence that gender reforms as part of UNMIL have promoted the valuing of gender equality and improved police competency, beginning to facilitate the conditions for equal opportunity peacekeeping. Overall, the book reveals how a focus upon increasing the numbers of female peacekeepers, though important, relies on "notions of fixed gendered dichotomies" (p.167) which do not disturb the wider gendered power relations which shape women's participation and disallows it to become equal. Yet, through a broader equal opportunity framework, one that is committed to promoting shifts in practices and behaviours, meaningful change can be achieved which creates the conditions through which more equal gender relations can become possible.

In this vein, the book's real contribution lies in its identification of the conditions through which gender's relationship to peacekeeping might shift, and Chapter 8 develops an array of detailed policy prescriptions for this purpose. The authors argue they are not calling for the eradication of masculinities here but rather their reconstitution in ways which go beyond hierarchy, in which constructions of masculinity and femininity are not seen as mutually exclusive but become equally valued within PKO's. I feel there is an important synergy here between the book's analysis and wider feminist arguments being developed by scholars such as Duncanson and Woodward (2016), who explore the conditions through which military identity might become "regendered" in ways which actively dismantle gender hierarchy and allow new ways of doing gender in militaries to emerge (see also Cockburn and Hubic, 2002). In this sense the inclusion of women is only one part of the picture. Meaningful change also demands the reversal of practices marked masculine and the displacement of the wider gendered structures which privilege masculinity and men's participation within PKO's. Karim and Beardsley therefore illustrate the continued need for future research to explore the conditions through which the identity of the peacekeeper might become regendered in ways which equally value non-dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity, thus disturbing gender's constitution as a hierarchical construct which always privileges the masculine over the feminine.

Through the book's effort to identify such conditions and the policy changes which can enable them, Karim and Beardsley make a highly significant contribution to the study of gender and peacekeeping practices to begin to theorise opportunities for change. As such, the book will be of considerable interest to both feminist scholarship alert to how gender shapes peacekeeping practices and the wider peacekeeping literature that is, as Karim and Beardsley recognise, yet to take gender seriously. Thus, *Equal Opportunity Peacekeeping* makes a significant contribution to identifying the mechanisms through which peacekeeping practices can begin to equally value women's participation, which will be of considerable interest to all students of gender and international relations.

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About the author:

Matthew Kearns is a doctoral candidate in the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology at Newcastle University, UK. His research interests concern the representations through which state militaries recruit their personnel and how they produce and perform diverging constructions of gender. Through this, his research speaks to wider feminist debates concerning military masculinities and their potential to become displaced in changing security contexts. He has recently published work in the *International Feminist Journal of Politics* on gender, visual securitization and the 2001 war in Afghanistan.