Sexual Abuse in UN Peacekeeping: The Problem of Viewing Women as a 'Quick Fix'

https://www.e-ir.info/2020/02/20/sexual-abuse-in-un-peacekeeping-the-problem-of-viewing-women-as-a-quick-fix/

BRIANNA NICOLE HERNANDEZ, FEB 20 2020

The first official allegations about peacekeeper involvement in sexual misconduct came to light during the UN mission in Cambodia in 1992, this was followed by reports from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Haiti, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and East Timor (Simic, 2010). These accusations have become more common as the scale of peacekeeping has grown. 'In 2006, for example, there were 357 allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse involving UN peacekeepers and 252 were substantial enough to warrant investigation. The growing caseload led to calls for a renewed commitment to investigate and prosecute those accused and to help the victims' (Fasulo, 2009). However, peacekeepers guilty of sexual violence and other war crimes perpetuated in conflict and post-conflict nations have enjoyed a history of immunity in their home countries and abroad because they are seen first and foremost as stabilizers. This is the history, and present reality, the UN is contending with. Though the efforts should have come earlier, it is important to acknowledge that the United Nations is now attempting to address this abuse of power by peacekeepers.

The Security Council has adopted multiple resolutions geared towards improving the status of women, for example in the realm of peacekeeping operations. This rationalization is reinforced by research put forth by Lisa Hultman and Kain Johansson – among others – who study the relationship between sexual exploitation and abuse and peacekeeping operations. In using the Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict dataset (SVAC), the authors found that reports of sexual violence on average increase the likelihood of a peacekeeping operation (Fasulo, 2009). Acts of sexual violence and how they are characterized affect the way in which we securitize – when we go in and who we send.

As part of the UN addressing the status of women, focus has recently been placed on the role of female peacekeepers. Scholars and policy makers have posited numerous benefits of including women as peacekeepers, even saying that they increase the likelihood for 'civilized' behavior among staff and add legitimacy to missions. For example, female peacekeeping officers are seen as being able to diffuse potentially violent situations without the use of force more effectively than male counterparts. Further, 'many have suggested that women are needed in peacekeeping at least in part because they can be expected to behave better than their male counterparts or to influence their male colleagues to behave better'(Fasulo, 2009). Here, we find, unfortunately common, language that tells international society men are not completely responsible for their own actions and women must play a role in curtailing less desirable aggressive male tendencies. This problematic notion is, in part, responsible for biased, unreasonable, and failed approaches to dealing with acts of sexual abuse and exploitation (SEA) during conflict – including acts committed by peacekeepers. In order for us to truly understand the conditions in which peacekeeping occurs and design appropriate responses to allegations of SEA by UN personnel, the role of women cannot be marginalized or mythicized as a magical tool for mediation of war.

While this essay acknowledges the legal limitations of UN punishment of acts that are against it's resolutions and beliefs, it is important to note that even this international body that flaunts commitment to equality and gender-mainstreaming is, in practice, reproducing gendered – and more importantly false – notions of peace and security as exemplified by the body's response to sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers. The United Nations response to sexual exploitation and abuse is a gendered one that falls into problematic narratives that produce policies and

Sexual Abuse in UN Peacekeeping: The Problem of Viewing Women as a 'Quick Fix'

Written by Brianna Nicole Hernandez

actions that don't effectively address gender issues in peacekeeping and leaves us blind to truly understanding perpetrators and the conditions in which they thrive. The important role that framing and construction plays in acknowledging phenomena and crafting policy movements must be addressed. In not challenging traditionally conceived notions of gender roles, we cannot create scholarship or implement missions that reflects the complex realities of conflict zones and the atrocities that occur within them. We cannot claim to understand violence – or security, if willful ignorance of the embedded gendered social conditions which structure our daily lives and characterize the enviornment in which actors are discussed continues to impair researchers and practitioners.

Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) in Peacekeeping

'International peacekeeping missions have been accused of sometimes creating a predatory sexual culture, where reports involve everything from peacekeepers coercing vulnerable individuals to provide sexual favors in exchange for food or meager pay, to reported instances of rape at gunpoint' (Nordas,2013). How are we to understand the moment when peacekeeper becomes perpetrator? In 1984, Diana Russell developed a four-factor model which suggests preconditions that allow rape to occur: (1) factors creating a predisposition or a desire to rape, (2) factors reducing internal inhibitions against acting out this desire, (3) factors reducing social inhibitions against acting out this desire, and (4) factors reducing the potential victim's ability to resist or avoid the rape. According to Russell's model, the context of peacekeeping seems to generate an environment ripe for abuse; one characterized by power dynamics and group think. War torn arenas tend to support a culture of power-over as opposed to power-to.

In situations of unequal power, any sexual relations could fall under the threshold of sexual exploitation and abuse, not only those acts which are committed using brute force or immediate threat of force. A distinction could be drawn between SEA that involves direct physical force and violence and transactional sex, but this does not seem pertinent when the power difference between those involved is palpable. For example, the degree to which women who trade sex for food in the context of a peacekeeping operation are doing so out of their own free will—and the degree to which they have a real choice, is debatable. Since rape is more common when the potential victim is devalued and the perceived costs on the perpetrator are low, a coercive environment, such as a post-conflict zone, makes the use of direct force unnecessary for incidents of sexual misconduct.

Despite recent international awareness of the problem of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) in peacekeeping, few studies have studied this issue comparatively (Nordas, 2013). Most studies on peacekeeping focus on the operations ability to keep peace. There are few that address sexual exploitation and abuse directly. 'To date, the study of drivers of SEA in peacekeeping has been severely hampered by a lack of systematic data. However, studying SEA in peacekeeping presents significant challenges, related in particular to data reliability'(Nordas, 2013). "Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by Peacekeepers: Understanding Variation" provides researchers with a relatively new dataset that looks to contribute to filling this hole in the literature. The study covers the 36 international peacekeeping missions by the United Nations, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Economic Community of West African States, and the African Union, active in the years 1999–2010. The dataset is useful for analyzing how reported sexual predation varies across peacekeeping contexts. This, in turn, allows researchers to look at the conditions in which perpetrators thrive. The data indicates that SEA 'was more frequently reported in situations with lower levels of battle-related deaths, in larger operations, in more recent operations, the less developed the country hosting the mission, and in operations where the conflict involved high levels of sexual violence' (Nordas, 2013). Oddly, missions with mandates that specifically mention women tend to be associated with a higher likelihood of reports of sexual violence. Peacekeeping is likely to limit the naming and shaming of violators; another seemingly paradoxical reality. However, these odd truths fit well in the broader narrative surrounding our defining of gender roles and the consequences of problematic norms.

Reality Fueled by Myth

As the number of incidents of peacekeepers accused of sexual abuse increases, there is a prevailing view that such crimes could be reduced or eliminated if there were an increase in women wearing UN blue helmets. Women are being encouraged to join peacekeeping operations as sexual violence problem-solving forces while also being labeled 'protectors' of local women from both local men and foreign male peacekeepers. 'Rather than achieving

Sexual Abuse in UN Peacekeeping: The Problem of Viewing Women as a 'Quick Fix'
Written by Brianna Nicole Hernandez

gender balance, the UN's notion of female peacekeepers reinforces gender stereotypes by suggesting that women's presence can have a 'pacifying effect' on their male colleagues' (Simic, 2010). The idea is that this 'pacifying effect' will lead to a drop in the amount of brothels that spring up around peacekeeping bases, a reduction of the number of abandoned children, and aid in the fight against sexually transmitted diseases. Tarja Va¨yrynen argues, that the UN discourse on gender and peacekeeping operations represents a typical modern binary structure. The complex defining of gender is often misunderstood in this way and has a history of being presented in official documents as a synonym for woman. The story of women peacekeepers being 'naturally' inclined to help address women's issues and curtail the bad behavior of their male counterparts is a myth. A myth in which ideas and actors associated with femininity seem to be delegitimized, while simultaneously being the crutch of legitimacy the UN intends to stand on. Yet the challenges women face when segregated as tokens in a hypermasculine space are often overlooked. In practice, this can manifest as a double burden for women peacekeepers: trying to help local women to address their cases of sexual violence, but also preventing violent disputes that may arise among men – this does not include consideration of possible exposure of women peacekeepers to SEA by their peers.

According to *Women in Blue Helmets,* there is some evidence that suggests 'gender-balanced groups are more likely to take gender into account and that women's inclusion in decision-making results in better policy outcomes for women.' While this does seem to be a logical conclusion, it is oversimplified. It may be true that the presence of women in the decision-making process produces outcomes that better acknowledge women's issues and possible responses, but the environmental conditions in which these decisions are made is of great importance. Peacekeeping missions are composed of civilians, civilian police, and military contingents – international military and police forces have the largest presence. Military peacekeeping masculinities create a complex and nuanced range of peacekeeper identities. This cannot be explored in isolation from the intra-power relations where men occupy different spaces on the spectrum of masculinity, which are described as either marginal or hegemonic. The hypermasculine environment often found in male-majority units may mean that only women who are the least interested in working with or supporting other women seek to join such units (Pruitt, 2016). 'Although peacekeeping is a relatively new model, it reproduces the same traditional combat-oriented mind-set of gender roles' (Simic, 2010). It also can reproduce common conditions and/or consequences of group dynamics. Kathleen Jennings illustrates this. In a 2008 report, she 'claims that there is no real difference between male and female peacekeepers, who will balance the effects of reporting on their careers, friendships and work environment' (Simic, 2010). This frame supports the feminist research that suggests that women tend to fit – either naturally, by choice, or through force – into the military hypermasculine environment, not change it. Peacekeeping is likely to limit the naming and shaming of violators as there is a complex system of identity to consider. Commonality – and survival- is linked to creating environments conducive to groupthink.

The United Nations thought they solved a number of issues when they instituted the first FPU– all female peacekeeping unit – in Liberia. These units, in theory, would increase the number of women in peacekeeping, provide better responses to local women's issues – especially areas where sexual violence was a prevalent part of the conflict – and inspire young girls to join national police forces. This mission resulted in women peacekeepers, due to heightened expectations and stereotypes, being more likely to respond to crimes against local women increasing their workload. Being that they are expected to take on all projects relating to women in the area as well as regulate the behavior of their male colleagues, it may even extend their deployment by months; which is what happened to the unit from India in the Liberian operation. FPUs essentialize women as best to work with other women and one can't help but want to remind the UN that separate has never been equal. A female Ukrainian officer who served in mixed-gender environments in Liberia expressed her concerns about the FPUs being commended as part of the UN commitment to gender mainstreaming: 'as for me, when we are talking about equality, it should be real equality' (Pruitt, 2016). She suggested referring to gender quotas and committing to mixed units as a better way to move toward gender parity – not all female units. A number of other officers that were interviewed and quoted for*The Women in Blue Helmets* expressed that they do not think they are viewed by the local population as women first and peacekeepers second, but, rather, that people see uniform first and uniform second. If people react to the authority that peacekeepers have in a local community, regardless of their gender, the struggle to increase the number of female peacekeepers has not produced the expected results. All female peacekeeping units (FPU) will not, and more importantly cannot, solve all the problems related to women, peace and security in the context of the UN. Faulty considerations of gender and power have reproduced problematic responses to a systemic challenge.

Sexual Abuse in UN Peacekeeping: The Problem of Viewing Women as a 'Quick Fix'
Written by Brianna Nicole Hernandez

Conclusion

Women are seen as a quick fix to solve the UN's sexual violence problem. Diverting responsibility to women does not address the problem of sexual violence in peacekeeping operations or help eradicate its causes. On the contrary, 'building sustainable peace will require work from both men and women, including peacekeepers, policy makers, humanitarian agency staff, members of community organizations, and the wider society' (Simic, 2010). What is an alternative system to interrogating, investigating, preventing, and prosecuting SEA by UN Peacekeepers? It is difficult not link this issue to a failure of gender mainstreaming in peace operations – and examine the claim in the UN more broadly. The UN is consistently short of peacekeepers for various missions, but this does not mean that it must accept troops whose behavior is far more serious than financial misconduct. Ray Murphy argues that 'if proper measures are not taken by national authorities to address and prevent such misconduct, then the countries involved must not be allowed act in any capacity that provides an opportunity for further exploitative behavior' (Murphy, 2006). Yet, can we realistically except this to occur in a world where even the leading international body falls victim to gender myths?

The representation of gender and violence is important when considering action. 'It seems that the 'boys will be boys' attitude is 'internalized' and accepted by more than just 'the boys' (Simic, 2010). Gender issues cut across all sectors of society, regardless of political, economic or social context. '[Feminist Security Studies looks to] challenge the assumed irrelevance of gender… [to] argue that gender is not a subsection of Security Studies to be compartmentalized or briefly considered as a side issue' (Sjoberg, 2017). Laura Sjoberg wrote that 'feminist scholarship, and feminist advocacy, is something that is fundamentally about security.' This is evidenced by the addressing of harm that is an inherent part of feminist work. Feminism has brought issue areas historically regulated to second class or ignored into discussion. An area that has seen a considerable increase in attention is sexual violence. Here, looking at sexual exploitation and abuse by United Nations peacekeeping forces and the UN response has further demonstrated that cognitive frameworks shape the way security is approached. Women appear to have been invited to join peacekeeping operations as moral elites to civilize men and set a good example. Evidence suggests that the mythicization of women has a practiced and problematic influence on official policy and mission construction of United Nation's Peacekeeping. 'Women are not some superpowered group naturally equipped to solve the problems blocking the way of peace' (Pruitt, 2016).

Sexual exploitation is about power more than gender or any physical attraction to a particularly sexed body. In the realm of peacekeeping, it is about the uniform; a sense of authority and superiority. In the language – the jargon – we seem to hear a lot about progress, yet the 'boys network' is being reinforced through systemic policies and practices.

References

"Increasing Women's Participation in Peace and Security" In *The Women in Blue Helmets: Gender, Policing, and the UNs First All-female Peacekeeping Unit*. Pruitt, Lesley J. Oakland: University of California Press, 2016.

Murphy, Ray. "An Assessment of UN Efforts to Address Sexual Misconduct by Peacekeeping Personnel." *International Peacekeeping*13, no. 4 (2006): 531-46.

"Peace Operations" In *An Insider's Guide to the UN*. Fasulo, Linda. 2nd ed. Yale University Press, 2009.

Nordås, Ragnhild, and Siri C. A. Rustad. "Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by Peacekeepers: Understanding Variation." *International Interactions*39, no. 4 (2013): 511-34. doi:10.1080/03050629.2013.805128.

Simić, Olivera. "Does the Presence of Women Really Matter? Towards Combating Male Sexual Violence in Peacekeeping Operations." *International Peacekeeping*17, no. 2 (2010): 188-99.

Sjoberg, Laura. "What, and Where, Is Feminist Security Studies?" *Journal of Regional Security*11, no. 2 (2017): 143-60. doi:10.11643/issn.2217-995x162sps66. 143.

Sexual Abuse in UN Peacekeeping: The Problem of Viewing Women as a 'Quick Fix'
Written by Brianna Nicole Hernandez

About the author:

Brianna Nicole Hernandez is pursuing her PhD, as well as Certificates in Women and Gender Studies and National Security Studies, at Florida International University.