

Can Peacekeeping Be Saved?

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Abstract

United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions are on the verge of being “cancelled” (Autesserre, 2019, p.102). This article examines why, and whether cancel culture is going too far. In my view, the three key issues that allow sexual exploitation and assault (SEA) to continue in peacekeeping missions tie directly to **patriarchal norms and practices, a militarized view of security, and a lack of local voice in policy creation**. UN peacekeeping can only be “saved” if these core issues are confronted and thoroughly addressed.

Keywords: United Nations (UN), sexual exploitation and assault (SEA), patriarchal norms and practices, a militarized view of security, and a lack of local voice in policy creation.

The Problem: SEA in Peacekeeping

UN peacekeepers are deployed to conflict and post-conflict areas around the globe to restore security, justice, and human rights (Jennings, 2014, p. 313). The first armed peacekeeping operation was deployed in 1956 (<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/our-history>). Since then, UN peacekeeping troops have grown to be the second largest military force deployed abroad, just behind the United States (Autesserre, 2019, p.101). However, little has changed regarding the gendered dimensions of peacekeeping troops and how the UN addresses the resulting problems, namely SEA. In 2015, 99 allegations of SEA were made against deployed peacekeepers – a strikingly high number as most SEA cases do not make it to the allegation stage (Smith, 2017, p.405,417).

This continuation of SEA is tightly tied to the fact that peacekeeping missions are inherently gendered both in their composition (largely male) and their organizational culture (highly militarized and masculine) (Koester, 2020, p.35. For example, many insiders have highlighted organizational cultures that normalize men’s exploitation of women and use sex (via prostitution) as a rite of passage and a way to acceptance within the group (Koester, 2020, p. 34). This blog post will examine the core problems of SEA in peacekeeping with particular attention to the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

1. Patriarchal Norms and Practices

It is no surprise that there have been countless allegations of SEA by peacekeepers in conflict zones considering the organizational masculinity pervasive in the UN. Sexual harassment

happens within the walls of the UN, so it makes sense that these norms would transfer to outside missions (The Whistleblower, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQMDjLt_bH8).

The case of Bosnia-Herzegovina clearly illustrates the strife that peacekeepers participating in transactional sex and human trafficking can bring to suffering areas. For example, evidence suggests that the peace operation in Bosnia-Herzegovina (deployed in 1995) provided a necessary ingredient for the emergence of the state as a major destination for human trafficking by creating a perceived and real demand for sex services (Koester, 2020, p.36). Because peacekeepers participated in buying sex from trafficked peoples, this act is beyond transactional and becomes exploitative.

Although the UN has policies restricting peacekeepers from engaging in sex with locals (including trafficked people in the conflict zone), there was and is little accountability due to the patriarchal norms of the institution. For example, with so many peacekeepers attending brothels and participating in transactional sex, who could be the whistleblower? Those who attempted to alert senior UN personnel in Bosnia-Herzegovina were met with dismissive attitudes due to the “private” nature of the crimes and the assumptions made of the sex workers involved (Ibid.). In fact, one whistleblower, Kathryn Bolkovac, was demoted, terminated, and threatened after reporting on SEA in the Bosnia-Herzegovina mission (The Whistleblower, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQMDjLt_bH8).



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Since sex work is deemed as private it is also deemed as marginal and not worthy enough to garner effective enforcement of existing regulations. (Jennings, 2014, p.325) Peacekeepers deployed in Bosnia-Herzegovina often referred to trafficked sex workers as “whores of war”, inherently removing their humanity (The Whistleblower, 2013,

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQMDjLt_bH8). These patriarchal norms and practices mean that policy remains cyclical and reactive – reacting to negative media attention with top-down policy, while allowing for the continuation of SEA through feeble enforcement and officer complicity (Westendorf and Searle, 2017, p.356).

While this gendered and patriarchal dynamic is prevalent in many troop-contributing countries (TCCs), it also stems from peacekeeping training itself. For example, UN peacekeeper training around sex with locals often centers the peacekeeper as the victim, warning of the danger of locals, their bad intentions, and their diseases. Not only does this skew peacekeeper view of locals in a gendered (the local as cunning, manipulative, and feminine) and often racist way, but it also serves to turn attention away from the sex worker and prioritize the protection of the majority male peacekeepers (Jennings, 2014, p.324). The resulting policy of zero tolerance therefore only serves the reputation of the UN and does nothing to address the structural and contextual issues at play (Westendorf and Searle, 2017, p.356). If SEA were only a case of individual misconduct, it would have been eradicated a long time ago.

2) Militarized Views of Peace and Security

Beyond peacekeeper training that prepares peacekeepers to view local people and especially local women as manipulative and treat them accordingly (e.g., with little respect and much distrust), the prevailing militarized view of peace and security also contributes to the enabling of SEA among troops under UN mandate.

I see this in the militarized views of security via the UN policy of repatriation. Timor-Leste serves as a key example of how repatriation has failed the public. Many women and girls were raped by or had sexual relations with UN officials during the peacekeeping mission. However, since all sexual encounters fall under the UN zero-tolerance policy there was no way or need to identify the differences between different types of sexual encounters. Therefore, all perpetrators were repatriated if there was any type of SEA allegation against them (Smith, 2017, p.414). If perpetrators were not found guilty, they left at the end of their deployment.

Community members in Timor-Leste testified that this was hard for survivors who had children with peacekeepers as they were often shunned from their communities (Ibid.). As in Bosnia-Herzegovina, survivors with and without children faced many challenges finding local support and employment due to stigma. This often forced them (back) into the sex trade or required them to take risks they otherwise would not in search of a living wage (e.g., through unreliable job advertisements that covered for human trafficking rings) (Koester, 2020, p.40). In this way, repatriation without survivor support only furthers the insecurity of women in conflict zones.

While initial repatriation policy only removed the individual that allegations were made against, the UN security council resolution (UNSCR) 2722 (adopted in 2016) went a step further to remove entire units that contain individuals who have SEA allegations against them. UNSCR 2272 also allows for repatriation of entire units when the relevant TCC has not taken appropriate steps to investigate the allegation and/or not held the perpetrators accountable (Smith, 2017, p.416). The advantage of this larger repatriation mechanism is that it is deeply political – it shames

those TCCs who are not following-up into doing so if they wish for their troops to be respected on the international stage.

However, while this mechanism of shaming TCCs may be politically effective and increase follow-up after allegations have been made, it does nothing to support the survivors who have suffered from SEA at the hands of peacekeepers. This focus on the “high politics” of public shaming emphasizes the importance the UN places on heads of state and military operations and illuminates how the very people that UN missions are mandated to protect are sidelined in the name of a militarized version of security.

For example, Kathryn Bolkovac and Tanya Domi state that they could not get press coverage for the atrocities of SEA committed by peacekeepers in Bosnia-Herzegovina (The Whistleblower, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQMDjLt_bH8). They argue that this was because the larger international community did not care about these “women’s issues” and instead were focused on “hard security” issues such as arms dealing and securing against another 9/11. This focus on hard security together with the complicity of officials and the anti-embarrassment policy of the UN made gaining traction and therefore change incredibly difficult.

Furthermore, reform peacekeeping reforms have often been led by male security leaders. This has led to reform that only furthers the militarization of peacekeeping policy and action. For example, the Brahimi report and the “responsibility to protect” doctrine served to increase the power that peacekeeping missions have. These reports transformed UN peacekeeping by encouraging peacekeepers to proactively use military force to prevent combatants from perpetrating violence (Autesserre, 2019, p.104).

UN Peacekeepers, during a military operation to protect civilians and their property (Photo: Harandane Dicko/MINUSMA) (<https://rightscorridor.com/three-un-peacekeepers-killed-in-central-african-republic-ahead-of-elections/>)



Courtesy: https://www.flickr.com/photos/un_photo/36311753351

These expanded rules of combat were created with intention to avoid another situation such as the genocide in Bosnia Herzegovina. However, without a gender aspect the militarization of peace will continue to harm women and enable SEA as it did in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The militarization of peace prioritizes the protection of women's bodies, not their rights, and leaves them vulnerable to further harm (Swaine and Turner, 2022, Webinar).

3) No Local Voice in UN Policy Formation

UNSCR 2272 aims to prevent SEA by peacekeepers under UN mandate. The resulting policy holds a line of zero tolerance with repatriation acting as the punishment mechanism. There currently remains no strong mechanism for true justice for survivors or accountability for perpetrators.



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Zero tolerance is one of the key speaking points of the UN regarding SEA. In fact, it often runs at the head of their press releases (<https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/ga11894.doc.htm>). However, there is no evidence that zero tolerance has improved accountability or reduced the number of SEA allegations. UNSCR 2272 does not address accountability to survivors or local populations that have been impacted. It is largely a reactive, anti-embarrassment policy that does not address the core issues of SEA.

UNSCR 2272 tries to save the UN from embarrassment by attempting to simply remove SEA from the conflict zone without confronting it. By removing the perpetrator via repatriation, the UN is effectively passing the buck. It is not asking why did this happen? Why does it keep happening? The curiosity that is required for the creation and implementation of effective policy is missing, and the populations that the UN is mandated to protect suffer.

While UNSCR 2272 was a step closer to effectively addressing SEA in peacekeeping, it missed the mark by relying on removal and ignoring the roots of the problem. Furthermore, UNSCR 2272 only came to the UNSC as a topic after much media coverage of the atrocities that peacekeepers were committing in the Central African Republic and evidence that those accused faced no consequences (Smith, 2017, p.405). This exemplifies UN policy regarding SEA as highly reactive, coming from the top levels of international diplomacy with very little relevance to implementation on the ground (Westendorf and Searle, 2017, p.366).

This top-down structure results in a skewed understanding of peace that does not translate to the conflict zones. To create policies and structures that make peacekeeping effective, strategy should be bottom-up and embrace grassroots organizations and local knowledge so that local people can determine how to best promote peace in their communities (Autesserre, 2019, p.102).

How can SEA in Peacekeeping be Addressed?

To effectively address SEA in peacekeeping, policy must go beyond the current mechanisms of naming and shaming, reputation shielding, and law and order to secure the social and economic rights of all women and girls (Smith, 2017, p.419; Swaine and Turner, 2022, Webinar). Policy must address the key weaknesses of the UN as an actor that is a product of a patriarchal and militarist system and in doing so confront the patriarchal norms and practices, militarized view of security, and lack of local voice in policy creation that has created an institution so permissive of SEA.

To build policy that addresses SEA in a wholistic manner the UN must acknowledge that SEA is an institutional problem. A UNAIDS staff survey found that 10% of 427 respondents had experienced sexual harassment at work (<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/jan/18/sexual-assault-and-harassment-rife-at-united-nations-staff-claim>). Internal dysfunction is compounded by the UN's active dismissal of concerns related to the "private" sphere as military security is prioritized in conflict zones. The patriarchal norms that the UN was built on must be confronted if peacekeeping is to be saved.

Second, to address the militarized view of security the UN must begin to view "women's issues" such as human trafficking and access to social and economic resources as an equal security threat to those included in "high politics". In the current militarized view of security, women's security is often undermined by military security (Smith, 2017, p.418). Gender based violence is a security threat and must be viewed as such.

Lastly, the UN must move beyond its view of SEA as an issue of embarrassment and shift its focus to the survivors of SEA (34 Smith, 2017, p.405). This must include an evaluation and inclusion of the perspectives and needs of survivors of SEA in all UN security and peacekeeping mission policies. Including the voices of survivors will also entail a UN commitment to follow-up and provide wraparound support for survivors. These policies may include new mechanisms of formal justice as well as financial, housing, and employment support.

In conclusion, peacekeeping can still be saved. However, it will require a thorough examination of the roots of the UN. Some roots will need to be dug up and thrown away, some may be cultivated, and new roots will need to be planted. Only then can SEA be eradicated and allow peacekeeping to flourish and operate in a way that is beneficial to all.

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