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Keeping the peace: gender, geopolitics and global governance interventions

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Note on contributor

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Abstract

This contribution examines who and what constitutes peacekeeping, and how this exacerbates gendered and geopolitical inequalities. While the number and distribution of peacekeepers

(boots on the ground) is highly dependent upon Global South men and Global North money, peacekeeping appears to be more gender-friendly and truly globally representative. Despite significant transformations in the nature of peacekeeping operations, it appears that many of the more recent changes, such as introducing more female peacekeepers, has done very little to change the patriarchal and colonial culture of peacekeeping. This article exposes the perpetuation of inequalities and suggests that such interventions need to be critically examined in more detail.

Keywords: gender; peacekeeping; geopolitics; global division of labour; equality

Little academic interest has focused on the role of gender, geopolitics and the global division of labour in shaping international interventions such as those of peace support operations.¹ As far as United Nations (UN) deployments go, the vast majority of peacekeeping personnel (per size of forces) come from Global South countries, for example and including India, Bangladesh, Ghana, Nigeria, Uruguay and Chile.² While countries like Sweden and Canada are often seen as emblematic of the global brand of peacekeeping, it is actually Global South countries that provide the bulk of the ‘boots on the ground’. This is in contrast to the bulk of the peacekeeping budget which comprises significant contributions from Global North countries such as the US, Britain, France, Germany and Canada.³ This Global South ‘presence’ is also significant in the representation of female peacekeepers, with India (and, subsequently, Bangladesh) sending all-female contingents from as early as 2007.

These same-sex deployments, however, were by no means new. Since its inception, peacekeeping operations have been an entirely male-dominated enterprise, from the top leadership of the UN, to the contingent personnel stationed at checkpoints throughout

missions.⁴ In fact, all-male peacekeeping was, and continues to be, the norm in UN peace support operations and it has been the introduction of female police and military personnel by countries undergoing security sector reform that has sought to challenge this general pattern.

This article challenges common perceptions of these trends in peacekeeping as simply either being the product of the application of a liberal gender equality agenda, or as being a gender-neutral and benign response to conflict. Instead, I argue that peacekeeping is Global North-centred in its formation and operation, and Global South-centred in its personnel – and that this precisely embodies the liberal peace agenda. Furthermore, peacekeeping practice is a form of intentional intervention in ‘the margins’ (through the ‘dirty work’ by the ‘margins’); a colonial practice, and not merely a side-effect of peace agreements.⁵ As such, peacekeeping needs to be understood as a gendered and colonial project and a geopoliticised form of labour.⁶ It is, after all, something which is practiced, and which is informed by European and US ideologies about how the world should be organised and ‘kept’.⁷ Thus, without a consideration of the imbalanced distribution of military peacekeepers (i.e. in terms of gender and the Global North/Global South) within these peacekeeping sites, only a limited account of the political impact such interventions have on local populations and global governance practices can be ascertained. Additionally, because troop-contributing countries (TCCs) do not operate purely as independent states acting exclusively in a country’s sovereign space, but as collective and globally sanctioned international interlocutors, it is necessary to explore their function and form at the micro and macro levels. It is crucial, then, that this analysis of the TCCs and the peacekeeping personnel they deploy is undertaken in relation to more general critiques of peacekeeping as producing and exacerbating global inequalities. We need to ask the question: who are the peacekeepers and why is it important to know about them? This article considers how the composition of peacekeepers and peace support operations matters. It matters for understanding the impact of contemporary

interventions in post-conflict contexts, and for unpacking the distinctions of ‘south/north’, ‘liberal/illiberal’ that this forum seeks to critically explore.

Research on gender and peacekeeping has demonstrated that there are a number of social, economic and political effects of the unequal gender composition of military and police peacekeepers on both the female personnel within the security sector and local populations. First, multiple models of ‘military masculinity’ amongst peacekeepers illustrate that not all peacekeepers are created equally or behave in uniform ways.⁸ Ideas about the homogeneity of military masculinity have been contested, with work showing the different opportunities afforded to peacekeepers from different national backgrounds to opt out of conventional gender expectations.⁹ However, the majority of these studies have focused almost exclusively on peacekeepers from the Global North, providing both a lopsided perspective on the contours of dominant masculinities and disproportionate attention to those peacekeepers who make up a very small portion of the total number deployed. So, despite all this research exploring masculinities and peacekeepers, scholars have very little insight into the experiences of those Global South peacekeepers who are carrying out the bulk of peacekeeping work. As such, it is difficult to understand what role the background or nationality of peacekeepers may play in shaping the type of impact they may have on local people. With an overemphasis on the Global North for its financial contributions in supporting peacekeeping and in relation to the small number of personnel deployed, it is important to understand peacekeeping as not only a hybrid form of intervention, but as a globally imbalanced and unequal one.

In addition, research shows that sexual violence, exploitation and abuse is linked with militarised subcultures. A long and problematic history exists between men stationed in peace support operations and the growth of sex economies.¹⁰ Incidents of sexual violence and the rise of commercial sex industries in peacekeeping spaces have been documented for a

number of years and persist despite the UN's increased gender awareness and peacekeeper training courses as well as the announcements of zero tolerance policies.¹¹ Attempts to increase the number of female peacekeepers has helped to ameliorate some of these harmful practices, but the overall numbers of women in peacekeeping missions has not yet reached a critical mass.¹² In addition, research shows that female peacekeepers are often restricted from circulating amongst other female peacekeeping personnel from different nationalities, and are relegated to their living quarters and segregated from male colleagues, thus indicating that the possibility of having a positive impact on male peacekeepers, and local women and men is drastically reduced.¹³ This is important to reveal, because it complicates the role of Global South women and gendered ideas within these global interventionist practices.

Since at least 2004, the UN has attempted to increase the number of female peacekeepers in order to address the significant imbalance in the composition of troops and police. However, much of the burden of this significant labour shift has been partially achieved by TCCs from the Global South. In particular, deployments of women from India, Bangladesh, Ghana, Nigeria, Uruguay and Chile have gone some way in redressing the imbalance. However, many of these national developments are either in the police sections or involve military personnel in low-ranking positions (i.e. not positions of influence or leadership). For many of the militaries and police forces, the organisation itself has not attended to wider gender equality and/or diversity issues and thus has not altered its fundamental organisational structure. In addition, many of these women sent to peacekeeping operations are able to deploy for up to one year precisely because they can rely on a pre-existing global division of domestic labour – that is, they rely on family and kin networks of care for the maintenance of traditional gender expectations at 'home'.¹⁴ In this way, their contribution to the liberal interventionist project is made available precisely by keeping domestic inequalities in place, i.e. in relation to poor women who provide their

families with underpaid labour, as well as relieving their male spouses of responsibility for participating equally in household labour. Their participation enables the UN to not only look good, but to continue to govern the 'borderlands'.¹⁵ While, more recently, countries such as Sweden, Canada and Norway have either confirmed a commitment to gender equality, or have increased their female contributions, nevertheless numbers from these TCCs remains considerably lower than those from some of the top 10 TCCs. As such, it is clearly that some peacekeeping women come to represent 'equality', but in reality, present as a foil for the deeply unequal divisions of peacekeeping labour that persist.

Female peacekeepers face a number of challenges and have their own perspectives on their peacekeeping work, yet their experiences and standpoints hardly feature in studies of peacekeeping effectiveness. Furthermore, female peacekeepers from the Global South have been given even less attention.¹⁶ Yet the UN continually praises female peacekeepers in a bid to increase recruitment and to represent themselves as a quintessentially liberal institution (i.e. diverse, inclusive, gender-balanced).

On a similar note, Razack argues that peacekeeping is not simply a gendered project, it is a deeply colonial one.¹⁷ Rather than evolving from an organic benevolence, Razack argues that Global North beliefs of superiority reinforce geopolitical inequalities by pitting one set of peacekeepers as civilised and noble against beneficiaries as savage and barbaric. In this way, it is the space of the colonial encounter where gender and colonial power relations are played out, irrespective of the specific nationality or geopolitical locatedness of the peacekeepers. It is not about where the individual peacekeeper is from, but what they are enabled to do in such spaces and contexts.¹⁸ Taking on board the critique of peacekeeping as a gendered, moral, colonial and civilising project,¹⁹ it is clear that the current composition of peacekeeping forces has its roots in continuing colonial practices. If the Global South is doing much of the hard labour and 'dirty work' of peacekeeping, then it means that the

burden of liberal peace-building is once again in, and on, the southern hemisphere. This was particularly clear in research I conducted in Liberia in 2012 where Ghanaian and Nigerian military peacekeepers continually reiterated themselves as ‘good soldiers’ when asked to speak about their ‘successes’. These peacekeepers were anxious about losing their reputation and status amongst other peacekeepers. It was clear that peacekeepers from the Global South felt that they were held to a different standard, a different set of expectations, both of their ‘anticipated’ failure (and ‘natural’ corruptibility) and of their overall professionalism and military proficiencies.²⁰

The impact of this gendered and globally skewed concentration of peacekeepers is that pre-existing geopolitical inequalities are exacerbated and patriarchal organisations such as the military and police remain significantly under-challenged. That is, forces are not compelled to alter their organisation and command structures in order to accommodate global gender equality goals and measures. This means that including women into the missions does very little to alter gender relations or challenge patriarchy more generally.²¹ In my own research in Liberia, it was clear amongst Nepalese and Philippines contingents that women were so small in number that they were regarded as more vulnerable by their commanding officers. In one interview a senior officer told me that he had been instructed by the Force Commander of the mission to ‘not let his girls out’ during their one-year posting. Similarly, in order to maintain respectability, female personnel from India, for example, spent so much time in their accommodations at the base, that many said that they had developed ‘cabin fever’ due to a lack of freedom of movement. Thus, even when speaking to peacekeepers from the Global South, it is evident that issues of force protection (physical and reputational) are not of the same importance or have the same impact for all peacekeepers.

Research on peacekeeping therefore clearly needs to better understand gender (in its fullest sense), militarised masculinities amongst different TCCs, and how the political

economy of peacekeeping determines much of the effect on peacekeeping practices (as well as on peacekeepers themselves and their families). Knowing about the gendered, geopolitical and global division of peacekeeping labour may enable researchers to critically understand the interventions as relying on, and perhaps perpetuating, problematic liberal and illiberal ideologies and practices, and therefore maintain globally unequal relations.

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Endnotes

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- ¹ Henry, 'Peacexploitation?'; Henry, 'Parades, Parties and Pests'.
- ² Cunliffe, *Legions of Peace*; Henry, 'Parades, Parties and Pests'.
- ³ United Nations Peacekeeping Information: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/how-we-are-funded> [Accessed 3 July 2018].
- ⁴ Whitworth, *Men, Militarism, and UN Peacekeeping*.
- ⁵ Thakur et al., *Unintended Consequences of Peacekeeping Operations*.
- ⁶ Henry, 'Peacexploitation?'; Jennings and Bøås, 'Transactions and Interactions'.
- ⁷ Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance*; Jennings, 'Life in a "Peace-kept" City'.
- ⁸ Cockburn and Zarkov, *The Postwar Moment*; Duncanson, 'Forces for Good?'; Kronsell and Svedberg, *Making Gender, Making War*; Henry, 'Problematizing Military Masculinity'; Holmes, 'The Commonwealth, Gender and Peacekeeping'.
- ⁹ Mäki-Rahkola and Myrntinen, 'Reliable Professionals, Sensitive Dads'; Bevan and MacKenzie, "'Cowboy" Policing versus "the Softer Stuff".'
- ¹⁰ Whitworth, *Men, Militarism, and UN Peacekeeping*; Jennings, 'Service, Sex, and Security'.
- ¹¹ Mackay, 'Training the Uniforms'.
- ¹² Karim and Beardsley, 'Explaining Sexual Exploitation and Abuse'; Karim and Beardsley, *Equal Opportunity Peacekeeping*; Pruitt, *The Women in Blue Helmets*.
- ¹³ Henry, 'Peacexploitation?'.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Duffield, 'Governing the Borderlands'.

¹⁶ Henry, 'Peaceexploitation?'; Pruitt, *The Women in Blue Helmets.*; Karim and Beardsley, *Equal Opportunity Peacekeeping.*

¹⁷ Razack, *Dark Threats and White Knights.*

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.; Duffield, 'Governing the Borderlands'; Whitworth, *Men, Militarism, and UN Peacekeeping*; Paris, 'International Peacebuilding'.

²⁰ Henry, 'Parades, Parties and Pests'.

²¹ Thus even while the challenge to gender equality is weak it also serves as a foil for making acceptable peacekeeping as a colonial practice.