Peacexploitation? A study of Indian female peacekeepers

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LSE's Dr Marsha Henry questions whether the deployment of female Indian peacekeepers is evidence of gendered success or globalised exploitation and argues that, in addition to gender, global class, nationality and ethnic and racial formations should also be considered when thinking about the peacekeeping industry.

To mark the International Day of UN Peacekeepers on May 29, the United Nations honoured 112 peacekeepers, including three Indians, who were killed in operations around the world in 2011. The Indians honoured lost their lives while serving with UN peacekeeping missions in Lebanon and Congo. India is currently the third-largest contributor of military and police personnel to UN peacekeeping operations, having deployed over 8,000 men and women. The female contingent of India's peacekeeping force is particularly notable: in 2007, the country deployed a unit of more than 100 female militarised police to the UN Mission in Liberia.

The deployment was hailed as potentially transformative and was seen as a key step towards altering the conditions for local girls and women in post-conflict situations, particularly in light of increasing reports of sexual exploitation and abuse by male peacekeepers. It also furthered the UN's attempts at gender mainstreaming in post-conflict situations as per UN Resolution 1325. But LSE's Dr Marsha Henry, lecturer in Gender, Development and Globalisation, questions whether the deployment is evidence of gendered success or globalised exploitation. In an article published earlier this year, she argues that the geography of global class, nationality and ethnic and racial formations should be considered in addition to the politics of gender when thinking about the peacekeeping industry.

As part of her argument, Dr Henry deconstructs "Girl Squad", a 30-minute BBC documentary on the Indian unit, to see how female peacekeepers are (mis)represented as gendered subjects in post-conflict situations. As she puts it, "the documentary highlighted how women are evoked as a possible solution or a better response in post-conflict situations without looking at the way things actually work." In her article, Henry shows how the film perpetuates a "maternalist narrative" that proposes that "women are inherently suited to peace-promoting activities" by including scenes of the female peacekeepers interacting with their families prior to deployment.

Here's where Henry thinks something is missing: "No one takes into account the women's opinion about the people they're deployed to protect and educate. Without a deeper understanding of the dynamics, such deployments can be quite problematic." One of the problems, Henry points out, is the assumption that all women are the same. "I find the idea of women solidarity problematic." She challenges this assumption through the following reading of "Girl Squad":

> *I suggest that some of the basis for [the female Indian peacekeepers'] deployment to Liberia is a popular assumption of shared sisterhood among women from the global South…. But how do the female peacekeepers themselves experience gender and other relations while on duty?*
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> *Although [Seema Dhundia, the contingent commander] states that the female peacekeepers' presence is intended to reassure the local people that the war is over, the documentary and the women interviewed reveal that there is little direct contact with the local population. As one soldier interviewed suggests, they often think about women in Liberia and wonder how they survive. Despite this curiosity, the female peacekeepers also keep their distance and 'do their jobs'. But why should they 'naturally' gravitate to the local population when their training discourages them from social engagement? The women are trained to a high technical degree and are used to dealing with combative situations…They have no specific training or knowledge in the history and politics of the Liberian conflict, post-conflict contexts and traumatised individuals more generally… Why have they been deployed to such a mission, and what is their likely impact?*

> *Further conversations with a few officers reveal that there are significant geopolitical differences between the female officers and women in the local population…. When two peacekeepers are asked about their impressions of the local population, they share with the filmmaker that they feel 'embarrassed' by the ways in which Liberian men and women behave in public spaces. The two peacekeepers say that they felt their 'culture' was better than that of Liberia because women and men generally did not behave in a 'sexual' manner in public.*
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> *Many of the Indian female peacekeepers briefly shown in the film … will have been exposed to a sex-segregated family and work life in India. The documentary portrays the peacekeepers as 'respectable' and hard-working women who have earned their place in the military through physical strength and mental toughness. The women deployed have their identity as 'respectable' women reinforced through the film … while Liberian women are shown to be poor, vulnerable, and victimised …And while Liberian women clearly face many of the problems conventionally associated with post-conflict societies such as unemployment and homelessness, the film also contributes to a set of constructions where some women are represented as agents of security, 'upstanding' and 'respectable', and another as victims of insecurity, 'fallen' and 'damaged'. Surprisingly the documentary reveals that global class categories feature to reinforce ideas about difference between the peacekeepers and the local women over potential shared understandings and experiences of gender. And as such, questions about geopolitics need to be raised.*

Continuing her research on female peacekeepers later this year, Henry plans to further interrogate the feelings of deployed female peacekeepers, their understanding of the impact that they're having on local populations and their relationship with those populations. "The assumption that peacekeepers who are also from the Global South will understand the challenges of globalisation in post-conflict areas needs to be interrogated much more. Peacekeepers have a different perspective from where they're coming from in terms of their ideas, for example, of sexuality and morality," says Henry. As she concludes in her article, "accounting for gender alone is simply not enough. Thinking about both the economic and geopolitical power relations at stake in such initiatives reveals that there are multiple interpretations and effects."

For more on this topic, see Marsha Henry (2012) *Peacexploitation?: Interrogating labor hierarchies and global sisterhood among Indian and Uruguayan female peacekeepers. Globalizations, 9 (1). pp. 15-33.*