

Feminization, Peacekeeping, and Protection: Paradoxes and Ramifications

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This paper will examine the relationship between gender and violence in post-conflict settings through the perspective of peacekeeping operations. It is particularly interested in the paradoxes and ramifications of feminization on/in peacekeeping operations in Africa. As noted in the panel proposal, the representation of violent conflict in Africa is such that “Africa often emerges as feminized”. The implication is that feminizing something is a means of marginalizing and patronizing it; continuing this logic with reference to the post-conflict period, one could argue that feminization (of a people or place) helps enable the dismissal of local knowledge and means of organization in favor of (purportedly universalistic) Western/Northern prescriptions. It is thus interesting that, in many military contexts, peacekeeping is also feminized: it is not “real” soldiering, owing to the tasks entailed, the constraints imposed by the mission mandate and/or political and military leadership, resource shortfalls, and various other factors. Yet even if peacekeepers do not adequately fulfill the “ideal” according to dominant forms of military masculinity, they are nevertheless, to put it crudely, more “masculine” than the local inhabitants of the peacekeeping mission area, who need protection that (presumably) can only be provided by peacekeepers. Protection of civilians is not gender-specific, but the concept is used in highly gendered ways. Moreover, the need for protection implies vulnerability and (actual or potential) victimization, thus reinforcing the familiar trope of “women as victims” in conflict and post-conflict environments. Yet there seems to be a fundamental mismatch between the UN’s goals of protection, and its participation in and perpetuation of a peacekeeping economy that has concrete and often negative impacts on the local women and men it encompasses, as well as on the gender relations being negotiated and renegotiated within the wider society. This mismatch is also evident in UN peacekeepers’ involvement in the sexual exploitation and abuse of local citizens – behavior that could be considered evidence of the persuasiveness of another familiar trope, namely “women as whores”. The paper will thus explore some of the tensions around gender, violence, feminization, and protection in the general context of peacekeeping operations in Africa.