

# Review – Equal Opportunity Peacekeeping: Women, Peace, and Security in Post-Conflict States

Written by Serena Simoni

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SERENA SIMONI, JUL 9 2020

### **Equal Opportunity Peacekeeping: Women, Peace, and Security in Post-Conflict States** **By Sabrina Karim and Kyle Beardsley** **Oxford University Press, 2017**

Reading an academic International Relations book that focuses on the promotion of gender equality is both energizing and inspiring. The use of a positivist approach is methodologically sound given the research question driving this work. That is, to what extent do Peacekeeping Operations (PKOs) promote gender equality both in missions and through them? (p.4). Since the authors are invested in analyzing correlations between variables, observations of different data sets are both necessary and appropriate. Maybe the book does not have the captivating narrative of some feminist critical works, but it does test its hypothesis on the expected manifestations of gender power imbalances in PKOs.

The authors contend that peacekeeping missions' institutional barriers (i.e. gender power imbalances) lead to only partial success in gender equality. In essence, they reason, since military and police institutions (which comprise peacekeeping missions) are gendered institutions, it follows that peacekeeping operations replicate a gendered structure of power, which in turn privileges men and specific forms of masculinities. Thus, they conclude, there is a power imbalance in PKOs. The consequences of this imbalance are the favoring of rigid gender roles for men and women, the deep-rooted norm that men are protectors and women need protection and, finally, the potential for sexual exploitation, abuse, harassment, and violence (SEAHV) – due to the militarization process.

This is undoubtedly a fascinating argument. The relationship between the role of men and women within PKOs and the potential for SEAHV (due to PKOs gendered institutions) is an important one and clearly worth studying because it could uncover deeply rooted gendered structures and ultimately it could help overcome a dangerous trend. This book contributes to the understanding of the reason why we haven't seen much progression towards gender equality in peacekeeping missions. Indeed, discrimination and the protection norm seem to relegate female peacekeepers to safe spaces.

The normative question for the authors becomes how can these power imbalances be overcome? They envision two mechanisms: 1. Female ratio balancing and 2. equal opportunity peacekeeping. The first mechanism assumes that gender norms are predetermined and unalterable. Certainly, increasing the number of women in peacekeeping forces just because of the assumption that women are better at peace than at war, doesn't change the dominant paradigm that women are inherently more peaceful than men. The authors advocate instead for a "reprioritization of gender so that the warrior, protection, and militarized masculinities are not hegemonic or privileged." (p.43). The second mechanism – equal opportunity peacekeeping (hence the title of the book) is thus the authors' favored instrument to balance all forms of masculinities and femininities in PKOs. In effect, this would correct the stereotype at the root of gender power imbalances.

The theoretical framework of the book (chapter 3) clearly lays out the challenges for PKOs that are dependent upon gender power imbalances: 1. The exclusion of and discrimination against female peacekeepers 2. The relegation of

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female peacekeepers to safe spaces and 3. SEAHV of female peacekeepers on local women (p.27). The empirical analysis begins in chapter 4 which sets out to assess how gender exclusion, discrimination, and the gendered protection norm leads to a low participation rate of female peacekeepers. In this chapter, it becomes rather self-evident that the domestic representation of women in the armed forces may be an important predictor of the representation of women in PKOs. However, through a series of regressions, the authors conclude that in PKOs the norm of protecting women is applied both to the female victims of violence and to female peacekeepers. This in turn empowers and simultaneously disempowers female peacekeepers. This is a brilliant finding and it is consistent with studies in other militarized environments (Enloe 1988 and 2007, Chon 1998). Women can join the army, but will never *be* the army. The gendered character of state militaries is based on the norm that men are protectors and women are (in a subordinate role) to be protected. Thus, women are let in, but they have to adapt and cannot be in the position of protector because this would contrast with the gendered protection norm. This norm, thus, permeates PKOs because of the gendered structure of power within the military and the police institutions. Institutional barriers impede gender equality in PKOs.

Chapter 5 tests how gender power imbalances impact SEAHV in peacekeeping missions and finds that countries with better records of gender equality tend to have less SEAHV allegations. One of the most fascinating features of this book is hearing the voices of female peacekeepers about their role in peacekeeping operations. Oddly, however, they seem to value stereotypical women's roles. The authors claim: "Almost unanimously, a favorite part of the female respondent was interacting with other female peacekeepers and with local women" (p.118). Female peacekeepers seem to enjoy working on "issues related to women and children" (p.120). From some of the responses (p.120-121), typically, female peacekeepers are expected to be motherly with orphans and empathic with the locals. This would suggest that female peacekeepers do gendered work and are relegated to safe spaces. However, they also see themselves as performing functions that are essential and that only women can perform (p.120). I think this point should have been addressed more openly because the authors reach a different conclusion. They claim that these female peacekeepers are not perceived as capable of handling security roles, which is credible, but perhaps an in-depth discourse analysis of the responses of the women in the sample would have shed some light on their self-identity/role in the missions and clarified whether their role is self-performative.

The book is well structured and theoretically sound. In addition, a mixed methodology allows us to bring supplementary evidence that contributes to making the argument more solid and compelling. The topic of women, peace, and security is at the center of some of my undergraduate courses because it is crucial in International Relations. For these reasons, I wish it had been written in a more engaging way so I could assign it to my undergraduate students. Unfortunately, I can only recommend it to a specialized audience, mainly academics and graduate students, who work on gender, peace and security issues, and more specifically on peacekeeping. The book is an excellent analysis of peacekeeping missions and gendered norms that regulate them. Certainly, worth reading if one practices feminist curiosity.

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## About the author:

Dr Serena Simoni is an Associate Professor and Director of the International Relations Program at Samford University in the US. Dr Simoni's teaching and research interests include International Relations, International Security, International Organizations, Human Security, International Law, and Gender. She is the author of the book *Understanding Transatlantic Relations: Whither the West?*, a recent book chapter *Transnational organized crime and globalization: godmothers of the Mafia and the undermining of the Italian state and society*. She is currently working on her second book, *Queenpins of Organized Crime: Gender Hierarchy in Context*.