

Peacekeepers or Perpetrators? An analysis of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) by UN personnel in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Natalie Gilliard

Abstract

Peacekeepers or Perpetrators examines the complex international problem of Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (SEA) committed by UN peacekeepers in the conflict-ravaged area of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In particular, this paper uses feminist theory to break the problem down into its smaller components, including looking at the nature of the UN mission and the patriarchal structure of the international system. It uses gender as an analytical tool in order to view SEA as not simply a security issue but as a nuanced phenomenon arising from the intersection of gender, culture and conflict.

Some individuals in the western world may find the large scale sexual violence committed against women in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) shocking. They may turn a sympathetic ear to the occasional news report detailing the realities of mass rape, genital mutilation and forced prostitution which face Congo women on a daily basis (Meger 2010; 119-20). However, far too often the horrors over “there” in the third world are promptly forgotten and the conscience assuaged by affirming oneself that responsibility is out of “our” jurisdiction. Amidst this environment UN presence is supposed to function as a beacon of peace and hope. However, amongst UN peacekeepers sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) of civilians, most frequently women and girls, in the Congo has proliferated (Murphy, 2006: 532). These specific instances of sexual abuse are part of the larger culture of sexualized violence and exploitation in the Congo. They are an epidemic today, no less real than the spread of HIV/AIDS or famine. More specifically, academics should be concerned with analyzing how constructs of gender enforce and create such behaviours.

The question this essay addresses is to what extent feminist theory explains SEA of females in post-conflict DRC by UN personnel who are deployed for the United Nations Organization Mission in Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC). Not only are the incidents of SEA important but the ramifications of these actions; spread of HIV/AIDS, “peacekeeping babies,” shame, and the further entrenchment of gender inequalities into society must also be considered (Murphy, 2006: 534-5; Higate, 2007; 100). This essay argues that feminist theory is particularly illuminating in explaining how conceptualizations of gender and resulting unequal power structures cause SEA and shape the reaction of international actors such as the UN. The discourse this essay engages in is normative, which means that it does not detach itself from values to attempt to achieve objectivity rather its depth is enriched by them (Carver et al. 2003:289).

The essay will be broken down into seven major sections and, when necessary, sub-sections that will analyze how corresponding aspects of feminist theory highlight aspects of the case study. The first section considers gender as the unit of analysis and discusses how social conceptions of both masculinity and femininity as a “natural” fosterer of inequality and exploitation. The second section argues that international relations are conflictive and designed to exclude women. The next section discusses how patriarchy characterizes the international system and the impacts this has on the rights of women living in the DRC. The fourth section

examines the nature of the UN mission in DRC and considers organization, gender awareness training programs and short term views of SEA. It argues that patriarchy is primarily re-enforced. The next major section analyzes the behaviour of the UN and MONUC. It argues that unequal power relations with UN workers and locals results in an inherently exploitive situation. It further considers how the behaviour of UN workers affects their mandate. The sixth section will briefly consider the major tenets of realism to argue that due to its focus on security it cannot examine the case study as well as critical feminism. The last section is the conclusion which will summarize the essay and consider any weakness, generalizations, research recommendations and limitations of the research.

In 2004, an article in *The Independent* revealed a scandal of abuse in DRC by UN personnel (Murphy, 2006: 532). Although a history of such accusations has previously existed (Kosovo and before that the original DRC mission) the media attention sparked a formal U.N investigation into the reports (Murphy, 2006: 532). The Office of Internal Oversight Services and the Ambassador of Jordan both researched and reported on the problem (Murphy 2006: 532). The resulting investigations stated that various forms of SEA were widespread amongst MONUC and have existed for decades implicitly condoned (UNSC Report 2006). The number of workers accused- 152 (117 military) - is believed to be unrepresentative and reflective of chronic underreporting (Csáky, 2008: 12).

Gender as a Building Block: The Social Construction of Gender a Constant in IR

Gender, according to feminist theory, is a social construction which affects how both sexes think and act (Carver et al. 2003:289-90). The way in which individuals behave is directly related to their conceptions of gender. Although it is usually agreed (yet sometimes debated) that sex is biological it is argued that gender is learned (Carver et al. 2003:289-90). Individuals through complex social relations learn what it means to be “men” and “women” (Carpenter,2005: 296). Hence, in the DRC conceptualizations of gender have affected the responses of men, women, and officials involved with SEA by UN personnel. Therefore, in any analysis of abuse the function of gender narrows the focus of the case in order to illuminate how a “traditional” understanding of maleness and femaleness is detrimental to society and individuals. Thus, conceptualizations of gender are the standard on which to examine all other aspects of the case study.

Masculinities and Militarization

Despite the popularized idea that gender equals women, feminists have by no means excluded males from their analysis (Carver et al. 2003: 290). Masculine identities become hyper masculine due to military interactions influencing how men believe it is appropriate to act (Higate, 2007: 101). Militarization results from group mindsets and the desire to affirm “manliness” through sexual prowess (Higate, 2007: 101). When military become peacekeepers the inclination towards aggressive behaviour can be problematic in a situation which requires compassion. Evidence suggests that male peacekeepers in the DRC believed that they were doing nothing wrong by offering local women food, money or protection for sex (Higate, 2007: 114). Peacekeepers have an inherently powerful position, economically and socially, in conjunction to the local peoples (Puechguirbal, 2003:120). Therefore, when peacekeepers engage in buying sexual services from local women they are exasperating existing inequalities.

Furthermore, male peacekeepers were also perpetrators of acts of pedophilia, aided human trafficking, raped women, and inconsequentially abandoned children fathered. Despite

the overtly unjust nature of these actions many were justified on the basis of gender and a “naturalized sex drive,” (Higate, 2007: 105) By viewing male actions as dictated by an uncontrollable “biological” sex drive, both men and women who hold this view are inherently attaching legitimacy to the actions of exploitation.

Gender Roles of Women: The Passive Activity of Objectifying Women

Feminine gender identities in the DRC both sexualize and pacify women in ways subordinate to men. For example, female prostitutes were viewed as active participants who negotiated the price on their own bodies (Higate, 2007: 106-7). This view ignores the reality that the economic conditions of these women are desperate and that prostitution is often a way of survival. Furthermore, the economic juxtaposition between the peacekeepers who receive monthly thousands of dollars and the local women who live on tens of dollars renders negotiation illusionary. This is crystallized in the words of one peacekeeper who stated, “If a dollar can buy me a blow job imagine what ten could do” (Higate, 2007: 116). In addition, the gender stereotype of local women as the pursuer conveniently disregards the role of pimps and enforced prostitution. It further neglects the impacts war has specifically on women, which often creates emotional or physical scarring from violence, whether as victims or combatants.

Women are a vulnerable group in the DRC due to their low socioeconomic condition however; this does not suggest that they are passive or content with their “role” in society. The relationship between the idea of women as victims and their limited agency is complex. By considering women to be vulnerable there is an inherent risk of getting trapped in essentialisms and stripping women of possible agency (Carpenter, 2005: 310-6). By perpetually placing women in category of “victim,” it enhances gender stereotypes and ignores women's transformative role in society (Puechguirbal, 2010: 172-3)

This problem is further compounded because although they are not physically vulnerable in the way that the elderly, sick, or children are they possess limited monetary resources and suffer from discrimination. Thus, they do have special needs which the UN must consider and change through the implementation of affirmative action programs (Puechguirbal, 2010: 172-3). Hence, a balance must be struck between acknowledging women's disadvantage and condemning them to stay disadvantaged. Thus, the focus must not lie in merely including gender in UN analysis (which can allow the UN to feel they are promoting gender equality when in actuality they are using the word gender) but in aiming to change detrimental gender roles which foster inequality.

Conflictive International Relations: Organized to Exclude Women

Specific to the DRC, the nature of international relations is clearly conflictive both regionally and internationally. Regional tensions have resulted in the displacement of millions of people into refugee camps and ethnic cleansing massacring towns. The majority of political elites, combatants, commanders, whose input matters with regards to this “high politics” issue of security are males (Puechguirbal, 2003:127). Furthermore, those in positions of power have little incentive to change the existing power structure because it benefits them (Puechguirbal, 2003:1279). Therefore, it is not surprising that the issue of sexual abuse and the specific needs of women in the DRC have been marginalized. The resulting attitude is that rape and prostitution are simply another aspect of war (Lee Koo, 2005: 526).

It can be acknowledged that men are typically in the top positions of the UN; they are the political elites and commanders which directly and indirectly endorse the behaviour of UN

peacekeepers who engage in SEA (Meger 2010: 130). Specifically, military commanders have tried to make it as difficult as possible for investigations to occur. Troops have been advised to park their cars far away from brothels (to avoid detection), and to harass “whistleblowers” (Higate, 2007:117). Thus, a culture of impunity thrives and little has been done to prosecute individuals who have been caught engaging in SEA. The lack of justice can be partially attributed to the fact that the UN has little power besides dismissal and recommending that national states punish military involved in SEA (Murphy, 2006: 543). Therefore, despite global outcry there has been little done by the international community to enforce gender equality and to prevent SEA.

On the surface, international cooperation in the form of donating troops and resources to the MONUC mission appears to be cooperative. Furthermore, the international community has expressed its disgust at peacekeepers exploitative sexual relations with DRC females and endorsed the “zero tolerance” used by the UN (UNSC Report). In reality, international relations involving DRC are more conflictive than this would suggest.

Despite the UN’s call for more female peacekeepers many states refuse to deliver more women and because of the need for peacekeepers the UN accepts what it is given (Murphy 2006: 543). A more gendered balanced force would be beneficial as only 1-2 % of the peacekeeping force is female, (Bridges and Horsfall, 2009: 125). For instance, many women in the DRC, due to cultural reasons, may not feel comfortable talking to men about sexual issues and may feel afraid of men in military uniforms because of the destruction the military has created there (Puechguirbal, 2003:123).

Furthermore, a Marxist feminist might accurately note the international relations of the DRC as a developing country are largely dominated by the developed world. They might further wonder to what extent this interest in the DRC is based on the vast mineral deposits and how that affects women (Meger, 2010: 125). Women are victims of conflictive international relations. War displaces women, further limiting their possibility for education, resources and health care (Ross-Sheriff and Swigonski, 2006:125). To say they lack is not enough. Political structures and individuals discriminate against women on the basis of gender, thus, a more suitable term is taken.

Patriarchy: Rule of the Father as the Principle Feature of the International System

The claim that history has been dominated by men is an understatement and a blatant misrepresentation of the discrimination which women have endured for centuries. History has been created, documented, and controlled by men while women have fought to escape their role in the “private sphere.” To claim that the system is patriarchal means that at the expense of women, social, political and cultural structures benefit men (Meger 2010: 121-2). It is only recently and in certain places in the world that women have become a powerful force in shaping international politics. Even now the international system is still characterized by a deep rooted inclination towards patriarchy. The result is placing women as weak and in need of protection and men as strong protectors (Puechguirbal 2010: 173-4).

In the DRC, patriarchy has thrived. It manifests itself in the culture and laws which create an environment where SEA can flourish. Women and girls in the DRC according to the political structure have little to no rights. As a result they are incredibly susceptible to the advances of peacekeepers. For example, women can be married off without their consent, they cannot buy or sell property and there is no effective judicial mechanism to deal with the rampant sexualized violence which terrorizes the Congo (Meger, 2010:129-30). Furthermore, only certain jobs are

available to women and their ability to be educated is limited not only by their country's poverty but by historical discrimination (Meger, 2010: 129-30)

Despite international pressure on the government to implement the new constitution, including the section promoting female participation at all levels of society, it has been unable to protect its citizens and promote equality (UN MONUC). One argument is that there is no way to promote gender equality until a proper infrastructure is built. However, the infrastructure should be built to include gender equality and participation from both sexes. In a post conflict setting, such as in the DRC gender roles may have changed during the war, such as the woman becoming the breadwinner, make it possible for a societal transformation (Lee Koo, 2005: 531; Puechguirbal, 2010: 178). Conversely, anger and nostalgia for a return to traditional ways often characterizes a post conflict setting (Lee Koo, 2005: 531). Thus, the possibility for major change is lost due to a desire to return to the comforts of patriarchy.

Despite differences in opinions regarding appropriate treatment of women across cultural boundaries an almost unanimous failure to punish personnel exists due to the international nature of patriarchy. The problem is further compounded by international organized crime which forces women into the sex trade. Human traffickers supply women to places where peacekeepers are located aware that the men there have the foreign money to buy (Murphy, 2006: 541). Thus, the UN is strengthening economic relations with the very thing it is trying to fight, due to the existence of SEA. Furthermore, it was a common opinion of men in the peacekeeping force that they were "respecting" the local culture by having sex with girls over the age of 14 because that is the age of consent in the Congo (Higate, 2007: 107). It is interesting how the men justified having sex with minors on basis of "respect." One wonders what "disrespect" would look like.

Nature of the UN Mission: Structure and Short-Term Blindness

The structure of the UN has been cited as a reason for the proliferation of SEA. The first aspect to consider is the organizational problem. There are multiple types of personnel involved in the MONUC mission. Specific to the security aspect, there is the military or "blue helmets", civilians, volunteers, military observers and police units and then, there are those from other UN departments such as UNHR, or UNDP helping development (Murphy, 2006: 533). Additionally, the security personnel rotate every six to twelve months creating an atmosphere in which their actions are not easily traceable (Murphy, 2006: 533). Furthermore, the lack of disciplinary mechanisms, training responsibility of donor countries and ignorance about gender specific issues add to the dilemma (Murphy, 2006: 542).

It is difficult to target a problem when it has been underfunded and ignored by senior commanders (Higate, 2007:107). Thus, the OGA has had to battle to get the attention of those in charge (Puechguirbal, 2003:127). In practice, there are many problems with gender awareness training as the UN has styled it. Gender training needs to be tailored to each mission in order to understand the cultural background of gender in each country and it cannot be focused on women's vulnerability (Puechguirbal, 2003: 129). Instead, it should focus on understanding and changing the relations between post conflict settings such as the DRC and gender roles (Puechguirbal, 2003: 129). Furthermore, there is difficulty "training the trainers," so that gender training is not implemented on a mass scale but is an occasional occurrence (Puechguirbal, 2003: 129).

Many UN workers who engage in SEA do not consider the long term effects of their actions. Fathering a child is not viewed as a long term issue when deployment is short term, resulting in thousands of "peacekeeping babies" (Higate, 2007: 100). UN foreign money and

power can induce jealousy among local males possibly endangering the lives of DRC women (Puechguirbal, 2003:120). However, even if UN personnel understand the effects of their actions there is no guarantee that they will care. Sexually exploiting local females sets a bad example for the proper treatment of female UN workers by local males (Puechguirbal, 2003:120). Hence, their behaviour is exploitative and dangerous. Conversely, women and girls suffer the life-long effects from gender based behaviours.

Behaviour of MONUC: Exploiting unequal power relations with local women and girls

The most widespread behavioural issue was engaging in prostitution, using either basic goods or small amounts of money in exchange for sexual favors (Meger, 2010: 126). There were also documented cases of MONUC peacekeepers buying sex slaves from local villages in exchange for necessities, such as break and milk (Meger, 2010:126). In addition a pedophile pornography ring and pictures, cases of rape including of minors, and suspected involvement with human trafficking were uncovered. (Murphy, 2006: 538). These behaviours were not limited to one type of personnel nor was it limited to those in the bottom of the command chain. The idea of “widespread” refers to a behaviour which is encouraged (either directly or indirectly) from the top down and present in all aspects of the mission.

All instances of SEA whether they are overtly or subtly forceful, are similar in that they are examples of a power imbalance between male UN personnel and female locals (Puechguirbal, 2003:120). Economic and social circumstances in the DRC are incredibly limited thus, “consensual” prostitution is a forced act and attempts by individuals to justify their behaviour on basis on consent misrepresent the issue. An example of power imbalance is evident in many UN officers threatening or bribing locals once an investigation began resulting in many complaints being dropped (Murphy, 2006: 535-6).

Create Success or Impede a Mandate: The Security Aspect of SEA

The UN is supposed to represent the better half of nation states and a collective attempt to create peace in the world. Although, it is a large bureaucratic machine it is unlike other international organizations because its interests are not limited to profit, security or humanitarian concerns. Yet, the UN’s goals are undermined by its own workers. By preventing forms of SEA it can increase local trust helping the success of the mandate (Resolution 1820). However, by allowing such behaviours the UN is potentially impeding its own missions because of damage SEA causes to local and UN relations (Resolution 1820). Thus, beyond constituting human rights abuse SEA can be further viewed as a possible peace and security issue.

Despite policies implemented to stop instances of SEA within MONUC and other missions in 2010 it still remains a problem. Today, MONUC has 19,008 troops on the ground, of which 17,112 are military personnel and 3,730 civilian personnel (including international and local) (UN MONUC). Recent attempts such as the creation of a disciplinary office, gender awareness training, strict dusk to dawn curfew and prohibiting brothels are ways in which the UN is attempting to challenge patriarchy (Puechguirbal, 2003:120). However, many of these attempts fail to address the root cause for SEA and fall short of advocating sustainable solutions.

Realism: The Obsession with Security Does not Extend to the Security of Women

The major tenets of realism, its belief in an anarchic system in which being powerful is the only defense and its fixation on state national interest would not allow for a very comprehensive understanding of SEA in the DRC (Lee Koo, 2005: 526-8). Realism tends to

focus on the conflictive relations of states and would consider a weaker power like the DRC to be of lesser concern (Lee Koo, 2005: 526-8). Furthermore, the actual behaviour of the UN would be seen to be a peripheral concern.

A realist examination would reveal that the state's inability to promote its national interest, security, has resulted in it being unable to protect its citizens (Lee Koo 527). The language of realism itself, its glorification of war and power is a very masculine idea. It would further encourage the use of the military and force ignoring the correlation between militarization and acts of SEA. Furthermore, aggressive behaviour is considered by realists to be a natural defensive and offensive mechanism (Lee Koo 2005: 528). Thus, instead of imparting seriousness to the issue of SEA in the DRC a realist would consider the issue as being a "natural" aspect of belonging to an insecure state. A realist view by focusing on high politics would marginalize the problem of SEA, considering it just another security issue. It would not be considered representative of larger issues (except as an unimportant manifestation of insecurity) and its unique aspects would be ignored.

Realism's narrow focus on state security would result in the case study being viewed as a simple security issue. A straight forward approach to a culturally induced and supported problem would completely miss the finer aspects of the issue. Feminism is also narrow in its focus in that it is consistently aware of the function of gender. However, instead of limiting a feminist's ability to see this problem clearly, this narrow focus does the opposite. In every aspect of the problem, the conceptualization of gender has shaped the response of the international community and the UN, thus, a focus on gender only highlights that. Furthermore, because feminism does not marginalize the role of international organizations it does not consider SEA to be a peripheral concern rather it is indicative of the larger issues in international relations.

Conclusion: Research Limitations and Importance

Research weaknesses and limitations extend to the reliance on secondary sources, the English language and an inherent western bias. Although, this essay explores an issue in Africa it has no access to primary sources written in either an African native tongue or French. Furthermore, it is conscious of its Western cultural bias. Although, there have been no documented cases of exploitative behaviour committed by MONUC females, it is quite possible that they exist and have gone unreported. Furthermore, male and boys constitute a minority of the victims of SEA but they have not been dealt with in this paper. Thus, by generalizing about relations between male UN personnel and female locals detail about SEA has been lost. However, victimization of males could be a future research project. Furthermore, SEA is an ongoing phenomenon which is not limited to MONUC and current UN research is focusing on Haiti (Csáky, 2008: 12).

The essay has argued that war has eroded the already limited rights of the women in the DRC. To take advantage of an unequal gender power dynamic, which consists of economic, social and cultural considerations, UN peacekeepers are perpetuating gender stereotypes and inequalities which threatens the legitimacy of UN missions in developing countries. The essay has shown the nature and the behaviour of MONUC has reinforced patriarchy despite policy intended to change undesired behaviour. Furthermore, it has argued that conceptualizations of gender are a cause of SEA. Thus, the problem is shaped by international relations and an international system which suffer from the same conceptualizations. Considering that peacekeepers have been entrusted by the international community to rebuild war ravaged countries, while following humanitarian standards and promoting gender equality, exploitation is

a blatant betrayal of local and international trust. The research in this essay can be broadly situated as indicative of three larger phenomenon; SEA by aid workers in developing countries, a culture of sexual violence in the DRC and more generally an indicator of how gendered relationships affect world politics. The fact that this behaviour is so wide spread despite the various backgrounds of UN employees is a testament to the inclusion of patriarchy in international relations

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