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Peacekeepers, Masculinities, and Sexual Exploitation

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My aim in this article is to analyze a set of gendered power relations played out in two postconflict settings. Based on interviews with peacekeepers and others, I argue that sexual exploitation of local women by male peacekeepers continues to be documented. I then turn to scholarly considerations of peacekeeper sexual exploitation, some of which accord excessive explanatory power to a crude form of military masculinity. This is underlined by similarly exploitative activities perpetrated by humanitarian workers and so-called “sex tourists.” In conclusion, I argue that a form of exploitative social masculinities shaped by socioeconomic structure, impunity, and privilege offers a more appropriate way to capture the activities of some male peacekeepers during peacekeeping missions. Finally, in underlining the conflation of military masculinities with exploitation, I pose the question of how to explain those military men who do not exploit local women while deployed on missions.

**Keywords:** gendered power relations; male peacekeepers; military masculinities; exploitative social masculinities

This article is concerned with the sexual exploitation of local females in two peace support operations (PSO) in sub-Saharan Africa. It aims to build on work focused on this particular expression of gendered power relations through discussions of how peacekeepers themselves, together with individuals who work and live alongside them, make sense of such exploitative activities. Based on a period of exploratory fieldwork conducted in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Sierra Leone in early 2003, the original motivation for this study was to treat the views and meanings conveyed by peacekeepers surrounding sexual exploitation as a resource with which to enhance the effectiveness of in-mission gender sensitivity training. While the gender training issue is dealt with elsewhere (Higate 2004), my overall aims in this article are fourfold: first, to signal the incidence of sexual exploitation perpetrated over many years by peacekeepers in PSO; second, to highlight the limitations of analyzing peacekeeper sexual exploitation by relying too heavily on the concept of military masculinities; third, to present illustrative empirical data from my own fieldwork.

Author’s Note: I would like to thank the study participants for their willingness to discuss such sensitive issues. In addition, it was the commitment and tenacity of Nadine Puechguirbal that helped to make this work possible. Finally, Marsha Henry, Jutta Weldes, and the three anonymous reviewers have provided me with insightful feedback on an earlier draft, much of which has been incorporated into the version of the article presented here. Please address correspondence to Paul Higate at Paul.Higate@bristol.ac.uk.
to demonstrate some of the ways in which peacekeepers and others close to them make sense of such activities; and finally, to argue that recent analyses of these gendered power relations can be further developed through acknowledging the broader social contexts that produce and are productive of them. My tentative suggestion—sketched in the conclusion—is that while the concept of military masculinities represents a useful sensitizing category, the notion of a particularly oppressive “social masculinities” (Connell 2002, 35) is better able to capture the intersectionality of gender, power, and sexuality (Fine and Kuriloff 2006, 259).

Background: Peacekeepers and Sexual Exploitation

Evidence detailing peacekeepers’ exchange of food for sex or resources with female minors and adults in PSOs continues to be documented (Martin 2005) both confirming and reinforcing earlier findings (Fetherston 1995, 1998; Enloe 2000; Hughes 2000; Mackay 2001; Higate 2004; Rehn and Sirleaf 2002; Zeid 2005). Peacekeepers implicated in these activities hail from developed and developing countries and have been involved in exploitative practices ranging from the routine use of young and adult women for sex to the manufacture of pornographic films with local women and girls (Martin 2005). While some peacekeepers might argue that local women are made more secure because they receive “donated” food, resources, or money, this view is problematic. The longer term picture for local people involved in these activities tends to be one of insecurity. The birth of tens of thousands of “peacekeeper babies” creates additional economic pressures on mothers and families. Furthermore, the marginalization of those labeled as prostitutes from their communities, and the spread of HIV/AIDS and other STDs, and, for a significant number of those being exploited, continuities between conflict and postconflict with respect to the presence of and demands made by military men serve to undermine the effectiveness of the PSO in question (Enloe 2000; Spencer 2005). In addition, the longer term legacy of a peacekeeping presence, as witnessed in Cambodia in the wake of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia PSO and in other regions where there have been “rest and recreation” facilities, is blighted by the development of sex tourist sites. These continue to provide opportunities for the routine and largely unaccountable sexual exploitation of young, vulnerable people (Enloe 2000; O’Connell Davidson 1998).

Yet, while justified concern has been expressed about the sexually exploitative activities of a number of peacekeepers, it is important to retain a sense of perspective about the positive impact that PSOs can have on local people, not least in providing security, as local women themselves have suggested (Cockburn and Hubic 2002, 106-7). Thus from helping to rehabilitate schools and hospitals to providing a security presence for the recent election in Liberia, many of the UN’s everyday activities could go unreported and unacknowledged. In addition—though in no way excusing sexual exploitation—the killing of nine Bangladeshi peacekeepers in the DRC in 2004 by
militia signals the hazardous nature of the work. Thus, it is important to stress that a focus on peacekeepers involved in exploitative sexual liaisons with female minors and adults represents but one, albeit negative, legacy of peacekeeping interventions.

Explanations of Peacekeeper Sexual Exploitation

As we have already seen, there is growing scholarly and policy interest in the sexually exploitative activities of peacekeepers toward local women and girls. Analysis of peacekeeper sexual exploitation has increasingly been treated as one element of the “critical studies on men” approach (Hearn 2004) within the context of the concept of military or militarized masculinities (Fetherston 1995, 1998; Cockburn and Hubic, 2002; Enloe 1993, 2000; Higate 2004; Whitworth 1998, 2004). The concept of military masculinities would appear to offer a useful analytical point of departure in explaining the dynamics of these gendered power relations, since the overwhelming majority of peacekeepers are combat trained military men (Fetherston 1998). In these terms, we might expect their social practices toward local women and girls to flow from military-masculine identities constructed around the notion of the inferior feminine “other” (Arkin and Dobrofsky 1978; Barrett 1996; Morgan 1987, 1994). However, my observation is that scholarly analyses examining peacekeeping and prostitution differ in the extent to which they draw on the concept of military masculinities as an explanatory variable. Here, commentators place differential stress on agency (military masculinities) and structure (including formal military policies and the economic conditions of the postconflict setting). For example, Enloe (2000, 99-103) is noted to work at a macro level in her discussion of a number of PSOs, making connections between the US Defense Department and its policy on fraternization with respect to US peacekeeping troops and local women. Reference is made to the complex constellation of social and structural forces shaping gendered social practice on the ground, crystallized in the phrase “the politics of peacekeeping prostitution” (ibid., 102). Similarly, Cockburn and Hubic (2002, 110) invoke peacekeepers’ use of prostitutes in Bosnia through the militarized culture in which the former are embedded. Their discussion frames peacekeepers through gendered power relations within the context of the perceptions of a number of women’s Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In maintaining a sense of the social and structural contingencies shaping exploitation, these two commentators go some way toward articulating the intersectionality of gender with politics and power, shaped by a sharply unequal socioeconomic context. By reflecting on the interplay of these dimensions, at no time does analysis become overreliant on the concept of military masculinities, although this concept is referred to throughout.

In contrast, there remains a tendency for other analysts of sexual exploitation perpetrated by peacekeepers to reify and homogenize the category of military masculinities in their attempt to explain these and other, quite different activities. For example,
in discussing the killing of the Somalian youth Shidane Arone by peacekeeping troops of the Canadian Airborne Regiment (Razack 2004), and the qualitatively different example of prostitution in the PSO in Cambodia, the explanatory category of military masculinities is deployed11 (Whitworth 2004). Here, the incomparable practices of sexual exploitation on one hand and murder on the other are framed as outcomes explicable through the concept of military masculinities.12 In focusing on the concept, it would appear that the narrow cluster of gender identities13 that constitute military masculinities (Connell 2002) is attributed a causal force so great that in effect they are implicitly assumed to “control men’s social practices”14 (Hearn 1996, 203), leaving little if any scope for reflection on military men’s agency. Echoes of theorizing about what might be described as a “thin” agency can be found in other work exploring peacekeepers’ social practices, as the following demonstrates:

There is no switch inside a blue helmet that automatically turns a soldier trained for war-fighting into an individual prepared to work non-violently and with cultural sensitivity in a highly militarised environment. (Fetherston 1995, 21)

While the point that soldier-peacekeepers trained in the use of violence might struggle in postconflict environments requiring compassion, sensitivity, and empathy is well taken (Razack 2004), the switch metaphor tends to cast peacekeepers as unthinking automatons. Although not relating to sexual exploitation specifically (military trained), peacekeepers’ apparent location in a binary universe of absolutes is further underlined here:

Learning how to fight, kill and win establishes particular ways of seeing the world in terms of us/them, friend/enemy, human/non-human. Underlying all military training is the connection between the use of force and gaining power and control over “the enemy” . . . this is illustrated most clearly in the “anything goes” frontier behaviour of some . . . who act like the conquering armies their training has taught them to be. (Fetherston 1998, 170)

Given the apparent narrowness of peacekeeper agency articulated in this excerpt and framed through the shorthand of military masculinities, it is difficult for these commentators to then engage with the broader structural context of sexual exploitation in its complexity. Their analysis is somewhat psychologistic, serving to “distil the aggregation of activity of [military] men into one neat word [or phrase]” (Hearn 1996, 202). Here, the tendency to reify and homogenize military masculinities duplicates a parallel trait with respect to the concept of masculinities more generally (Hearn 2004; Petersen 2003). In this way, the concept of military masculinities may come close to a tautology through its fixing of an apparently homogeneous “blue helmet/soldier” gender identity. Though the plural derivative is used in this theorizing (military masculinities), other work that has attempted to throw light on the intersectionality of diverse military masculine social practice with identity and structural context tends not to have been sufficiently recognized by these commentators.15 For
some scholars, the concept of military masculinities can assume a kind of analytical allure that can distract them from the social-structural contexts in which (in this example) peacekeepers find themselves.

Remaining sections of the article turn their attention to the exploratory study conducted by the author in sub-Saharan Africa. Findings from the fieldwork are discussed in the context of the intersectionality of a number of dimensions touching on masculinity, the socioeconomic contexts shaping sexual exploitation in contexts other than the postconflict setting, and the nexus linking impunity and power. My aim is to broaden and deepen explanations of peacekeeper exploitation in ways that put flesh on the bones of Enloe’s and Cockburn’s work, while seeking to further contextualize use of the concept of military masculinities.

**Exploratory Study in Sub-Saharan Africa**

A five-week period of exploratory fieldwork was conducted in the DRC and Sierra Leone during March and April 2003 with financial support from the Institute for Security Studies in Pretoria. The original aim of the study was to elicit feedback from military observers on the gender-sensitivity lectures received in-mission during their period of induction training in the PSO in the DRC and similar gender-awareness-raising strategies in the PSO in Sierra Leone.

Access to the peacekeeper element of the sample in the DRC was organized by a member of the Office for Gender Affairs located at the UN Headquarters in Kinshasa. In procuring an official UN picture identification card, I was granted considerable freedom to move around UN facilities and use the transportation available to personnel in-mission. Similar conditions held for my fieldwork visit to the PSO in Sierra Leone, since my authenticity as an official visitor was confirmed in advance by fax. On arrival in Sierra Leone, I was presented with a travel itinerary by the mission’s protocol office, allowing me to conduct research in a number of areas around the country.

The study sample was snowballed in each fieldwork site and in the case of peacekeepers, included a mix of men and women, some of whom had self-selected to be interviewed, and others who had been nominated to assist with the research by their commanders. A total of forty-five semistructured interviews were conducted with military observers, UN civilians, NGO staff, and members of civil society. Individual interviews were complemented by five focus groups with peacekeepers (three in the DRC and two in Sierra Leone), together with opportunistic, informal discussions with local people and UN and NGO employees.

Quite soon after my arrival in the DRC, in response to emerging concerns from a number of more enlightened peacekeepers and others in the sample, I reworked the semistructured topic guide to focus on the ways in which peacekeepers made sense of exploitative activities involving local women. My strategy to elicit data about exploitation when interviewing peacekeepers, in particular, was to avoid provocative
phrases and words such as abuse or prostitute and to use the somewhat prosaic phrase gender relations. On-the-spot innovation was frequently demanded, because a small number of peacekeepers were quick to identify the deeper intentions of my questioning in ways that elicited the official line concerning peacekeepers’ interaction with prostitutes. A more fruitful approach to developing rapport was further developed and refined after a few days, in which I presented myself as a veteran of the British military to peacekeepers, thereby playing up my armed forces insider status through drawing on specialized argot, for example (Higate and Cameron 2006). In fostering my research relationship with peacekeepers, I directed particular effort toward performing a somewhat disinterested and nonthreatening masculinity.18 For example, when peacekeepers spoke of commercial sex (involving either themselves or others) with females under the age of eighteen, I chose not to show my concern. This approach proved effective on a number of occasions in eliciting insights into the ways in which peacekeepers framed such gendered interactions.19

In addition to individual and focus group interviews, I spent time with military observers in their place of work whenever possible (normally a portakabin20 equipped with landlines and computers linked to the Web), chatting informally about issues linked to the research. I also became opportunistically involved in the daily activities of peacekeepers, accompanying two military observers on a criminal investigation involving a theft from a nearby hospital. The majority of my evenings were spent in leisure sites frequented by peacekeepers and local women (bars and hotels in Kinshasa and Freetown and in other towns), observing gendered interactions. In addition, three days were spent in an isolated sector site in the DRC in a town that had developed a reputation for peacekeeper-prostitute liaisons. The town’s shattered infrastructure, made worse by recent skirmishes, fed the sense of insecurity in and around the area, necessitating movement in UN vehicles, thereby offering further opportunities for informal chats with UN personnel sharing rides or, more often, driving themselves. Not unlike other militarized towns (during the conflict and now, with the presence of the UN), prostitution was present, but only recently had it become high profile.21 It appeared to represent one of the more lucrative ways in which local women, girls, young men, and boys generated income. During my stay, I was accommodated in a UN compound that formed the social hub for many UN personnel (both civilian and military men and women) in the town and represented something of an oasis of comfort within the context of the local war-scarred area. Idle chat at the bar could be quite revealing, and the nocturnal activities of UN personnel, including military peacekeepers, were frequently discussed by international visitors to the compound.

Contextual Events: Drc and Sierra Leone

Two important events frame the data presented below. The first concerns the DRC sex scandal, which broke toward the end of 2003, drawing significant attention from
the world’s media and the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, which established its own research into the issue (Zeid 2005). That these events occurred after the data were collected may go some way to explain the relative openness with which exploitation was discussed by two of the military peacekeepers in the sample and more informally by others. In contrast, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and Save the Children Fund United Kingdom (2002) report, highlighting sexual exploitation by humanitarian workers and peacekeepers in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea, appeared to have driven these activities underground. When compared with the DRC, discussions of sexual exploitation in Sierra Leone seemed altogether more muted, and participants were more wary than their peers in the DRC to discuss the sensitive topic of commercial sex.

Another contextual factor concerns what I consider to be—albeit somewhat anecdotally—the differential levels of morale in the two PSOs. In the DRC, against the backdrop of continued conflict in the eastern Ituri region, I detected a fatalistic attitude from a number of formal and informal participants. This attitude was argued to manifest itself in the superiority of a number of peacekeepers toward Congolese citizens. The perception that some peacekeepers might look down on local people was conveyed by a female civil society member who, during a group interview in Kinshasa, said that peacekeepers were nicknamed after the advertising slogan used by the cell phone company Vodacom. In contrast, the peacekeeping mission in Sierra Leone was coming to an end, and UN personnel reflected in positive ways on developments, including the establishment of the Special Court of Truth and Reconciliation and its ongoing efforts to build on and strengthen the peace.

The Findings: DRC And Sierra Leone

In the following empirical sections, a number of illustrative interview excerpts are included. Given the limited sample size and the relative rapidity with which the research was conducted, these excerpts should be treated as the first tentative steps toward building a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which peacekeepers and others in the sample make sense of exploitative gender relations. In other words, it is important to highlight both the provisional and modest nature of these findings.

The Driving Force of Biology and the Persistence of the Women

A female civilian UN participant interviewed in Kinshasa told me that she “preferred to work with a man who had a sexual outlet of [the commercial] kind,” since he was more likely to be “controlled” in the office during the working day. Another female UN civilian employee based in an eastern region of the DRC spoke of how a number of peacekeepers and male civilian UN personnel kept a “mental tally” of the
number of women or girls they had paid to have sex with as a way to compete with one another and “satisfy” their sex drives. The extent to which the male sex drive was seen to reflect an integral component of deep masculinity was generally beyond question for both the men and women interviewed in both the DRC and Sierra Leone. These understandings also permeated a number of the more informal discussions conducted with peacekeepers in ways that positioned this group as at the whim of or vulnerable to a sex drive that was seen to have a mind of its own. Portakabin banter served to reproduce and reinforce the somewhat mundane notion that sex with local women followed from this biological “fact,” the potency of which was taken for granted and considered largely unremarkable.

A further theme emerging in accounts from the sample concerned the enthusiastic attempts of local women in attracting peacekeepers. A female UN civilian in Kinshasa reinforced this point by referring to the ways that local women who were “after peacekeepers” would lift up their skirts to passing UN vehicles to “show them what they had.” Framing local women in this way depended on seeing the peacekeepers as largely passive in these encounters. The following excerpt from a military police officer in an eastern region of the DRC underlines the largely acquiescent role of peacekeepers apparently forced to fight off the women:

We were in a bar one night in [the local town]. It was full of girls, dancing and drinking... [they were] all over us. [This particular peacekeeper] paid one of the women to keep the others away from him, they were hassling [for sex] so much.

According to a locally employed male working for an NGO in Sierra Leone, women did “all the running” so as to secure peacekeeper “boyfriends.”

Just as soon as the [nationality of peacekeepers] are rotated, the women are straight up to Lunghi [the international airport in Freetown] to meet the new ones [replacement troops]. You see, they [the local women] are having relationships, and are all “in love,” and crying and waving them off [the returning troops]... next thing, they’re picking out the ones [replacement troops] they like, just after they’ve landed!

This participant went on to speak of the “relationships” between the peacekeepers (from a neighboring African country) and “certain” local women. He injected a degree of glamour into his account, painting the peacekeepers as playboys who were real ladies’ men, able to provide well for “their women.” A female UN civilian interviewed in Kinshasa stated that she had seen “older men,” “fat and balding” with “plenty of young girls around them.” She went on to convey her sense of revulsion at seeing these “unattractive” men, some of whom she had identified as peacekeepers and others as UN civilians. This experience had deterred her from socializing in certain hotels known to be pickup joints. During a focus group discussion, a military observer (married with two children) talked about his struggle to convey to locally employed domestic staff that he “didn’t need a girlfriend.” In response to this comment, the Congolese...
citizens with whom he was chatting appeared baffled and he thought considered him somewhat odd for failing to take the opportunity of extramarital sex with willing local women while deployed from wife and family for six months. Finally, a peacekeeper from a Northern European country, conveying a sense of embarrassment and modesty, discussed how his popularity among local women made him feel “handsome” in ways that he had not experienced in his home country. Here, his newfound success at attracting women served to reconfigure how he imagined his attractiveness. While he was adamant that he would not “cheat on his wife,” he nevertheless highlighted how tempted he felt when “surrounded with enthusiastic and pretty young girls” in one of the many hotels and bars in the town.

During an interview in Kinshasa, a peacekeeper openly discussed the issue of prostitution between peacekeepers and young females in the DRC. In the following interview excerpt, the participant is careful to discuss “these guys” in the third person. The hypothetical peacekeepers in this excerpt are framed as curious, while the young females are presented as proactive in their pursuit of the wealthy UN quarry:

Peacekeeper: These guys want to see what it is like.
Author: What it is like?
Peacekeeper: Sex with young girls . . . to see if it is different.
Author: Um . . . right.
Peacekeeper: Some of them [peacekeepers] have daughters who are the same age, fourteen or fifteen, and they want to know . . . they can have more than one [girl] at a time, it’s an adventure. The guys might turn them [the young women] down . . . but the girls are persistent and then it becomes a challenge for them [the girls] to get [sleep with] him.

Several participants suggested that girls “as young as twelve years of age” were involved in prostitution with peacekeepers in the DRC, a finding supported in other research (Rehn & Sirleaf 2002). A male UN civilian worker in an eastern region of the DRC had stated that in one class at the local secondary school “at least two-thirds of the girls are paying their fees with money made from sleeping with peacekeepers,” even though some of these girls were said to have regular local boyfriends as well. The age of consent25 and younger girls were discussed by three peacekeepers (interviewed informally in a bar), two of whom argued that “having sex with [them] was ‘respectful’ of local culture.”

In these accounts, the framing of a virulent masculinity in pursuit of a passive femininity is reconfigured. In this way, masculinity was presented as vulnerable to the predatory approaches of women and girls noted to be instrumental in exploiting the biological needs of their clients. Through asserting that peacekeepers are near victims of local women wishing to exchange sex for money or goods, the gendered power relations framing these liaisons are reinscribed in ways that ignore the starkly contrasting opportunities between peacekeepers and local women. In discussing the example of other men living and working in the postconflict setting, it has been argued that, not unlike the peacekeepers discussed here, “expatriate [men] complain
about the particularly aggressive prostitutes that target UN employees” (Martin 2005, 17). Similarly, evidence of women scaling fences and hanging around UN checkpoints and hotels used by UN and other international personnel has been documented across a number of studies (Martin 2005). These women belie their apparently passive femininity and precarious economic position in initiating sexual contact. However, the agency they exercise is put thus:

Exchanging sex or sexual acts to obtain protection, assistance, food and non-food items is sometimes misunderstood as an expression of agency. These acts may appear to increase a woman’s agency and her sense of control over her body as she is choosing to engage in sexual activity . . . [however] these exploitative circumstances do not involve real choices. (Spencer 2005, 171; italics added)

The often desperate circumstances driving the entrepreneurial strategies employed by these women were largely overlooked by peacekeeper participants. It is not so much a question of whether choices can be seen as real but rather that the opportunities open to women living in these precarious settings are severely limited. Local women were constructed as sexual players in an apparently equitable game through a “rhetoric of mutuality” (Brooks-Gordon and Gelsthorpe 2003a, 147). Ultimately, those women who accepted goods or services for sex were implicitly held to operate in a social vacuum devoid of personal history or current hardship. Though not presented in quite the same terms, nevertheless “the image of the innocent male seduced by the immoral female” whose “allurement” rendered men “powerless” (Brooks-Gordon and Gelsthorpe 2003b, 439) closely mirrors British Victorian attitudes toward prostitutes and their clients.

Money and Sexual Exploitation in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the less than optimistic views about the prospects for peace in the DRC, a number of UN personnel and peacekeepers were noted to rationalize their presence instrumentally by frequent reference to the remuneration they could generate in the form of mission subsistence allowance and salary. This was best summed up by a UN engineer who stated that there were “138 reasons for being here every day.”26 One corollary of the view that the international intervention in the DRC was ultimately futile turned on the idea that sexually exploitative activities were unlikely to exacerbate the already parlous state of the country and its peoples. This belief appeared to manifest itself in a weakened sense of responsibility, while reframing the exchange of goods and services for sex as a positive, nearly altruistic intervention. The nature of the monetary contract entered into by peacekeepers and local women represented a recurring topic of conversation. The reputation of peacekeepers as generous with their money (or otherwise) when paying for time with local women
was often seen as linked to the peacekeeper’s nationality and the woman’s bargaining abilities. Thus, the UN civilian and NGO element of the sample interviewed in the eastern region of the DRC suggested that the lower ranks of the UN contingent personnel from Latin America had a reputation for being “mean” or stingy when paying for commercial sex despite the pressure applied by local women to increase the amount offered for sex. One particular interviewee, a Congolese male member of the civil society providing support to women and their young children who had been raped by Ugandan or Rwandan militia, indicated that peacekeepers from a neighboring African country paid between US$1 and US$5 for sex. In contrast, it was suggested that peacekeepers from further afield were paying upwards of US$50, because they were more “vulnerable” to the negotiations orchestrated by local women. One story elicited informally concerned a dispute in the local town over the cost of a bottle of water being sold by a local (male) market trader. In response to the asking price of US$1, the peacekeeper customer—much to the annoyance of the trader—was alleged to have told him that he could “buy one of [the local] women for the same price.”

Broadening the Context—Toward Intersectionality

To recap, drawing on a modest sample of UN peacekeepers and civilians, employees of NGOs, and members of civil society, I have reported on some of the ways in which sexual exploitation perpetrated by peacekeepers has been described and reflected on. This discussion was preceded by an observation that analysts have varied in their reliance on the concept of military masculinities to explain a diverse range of peacekeeper social practices, including sexual exploitation. Attention now turns to a broadening of the context in which the exercise of gendered power relations in other settings speaks more widely not to military but rather to an oppressive expression of what is termed social masculinities.

Humanitarian Workers, Expatriates, and Sexual Exploitation

There is an emerging research interest in and documentation of the sexual exploitation of local women and girls by humanitarian workers that has close parallels with peacekeeper exploitation (Martin 2005; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2001; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees/Save the Children Fund United Kingdom 2002). Instances of sexual exploitation detailed in these reports have included the routine exchange of sex for goods and services, including material for shelter and basic foodstuffs, in camps for internally displaced people and other postconflict settings (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees/Save the Children Fund United Kingdom 2002). In addition, sexual exploitation perpetrated by private contractors and “nonspecific,” predominantly male expatriates living and working in postconflict settings has also been documented.
One of the most high-profile incidents of this kind involved the US contractor Dyncorp, which was investigated for trafficking in young women in Bosnia in 2000; these incidents also involved military peacekeeper clients (Harrington 2003; Martin 2005, 5). While the sexually exploitative activities of humanitarian workers are likely to be ongoing across the range of postconflict settings, including, among others, Liberia, research into gendered power relations involving civilian men and local women has been slow to emerge, with the focus—as we have seen above—falling on peacekeepers.

Sex Tourists and Sexual Exploitation

In extending the focus beyond the postconflict environment, it is possible to identify a similarly patterned interplay of power and gender. For example, in many countries, a multimillion dollar trade flourishes in which sex tourism is argued to “offer the key to a deeper understanding of the nature of ‘interdependence’ in a global economy between profoundly unequal partners” (Seabrook 2000, 5). The case of the sex tourist is salient to the current discussion, since the narratives produced by self-identified members of this diverse group share a number of features in common with the exploratory data included above generated from the DRC and Sierra Leone. For example, references to the “biological sex drives of males” (O’Connell Davidson 1998, 166); the notion that “it is the women who are in control” (Brennan 2001 647; O’Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor 1995); report on Venezuela); the subject of money and the nationality of those described as mean or generous; sex workers’ renowned business acumen (O’Connell Davidson 1998, 65); and the client’s transformation with respect to their attractiveness when in these contexts (O’Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor 1996, 2, 215) echo the narrative excerpts of peacekeepers and others in the exploratory fieldwork discussed above. Given the diversity of cultural contexts from which peacekeepers, humanitarian workers, expatriates, and sex tourists originate, it is interesting to note that their framing of sexually exploitative activities draws on and reinforces a common pattern of legitimation serving to obscure their responsibility for such activities. Here, sex tourists’ reflection on their near monopoly of power was rarely discussed or commented on.

In attempting to expand the frames of reference for making sense of sexual exploitation more generally, O’Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor (1996) stress the importance of the economic context of these power relationships:

[T]o argue that sex tourism or indeed any other form of prostitution exists in order to ensure that men can buy the sex act and so exercise patriarchal rights of access to women’s bodies deflects attention from these economic and social relations. (p. 61)

They go on to say that sex tourists (not unlike exploiting peacekeepers) have a tendency to be pathologized and reiterate the point that “any analysis of sex tourism...
which fails to consider its economics is doomed to provide only a partial explanation of the phenomenon” (ibid., 45). It is not only the economic context that should be considered. As Cheng Sea-Ling (2000) has argued in the context of prostitution more broadly, the client remains undertheorized (Grenz 2005, 2092) in ways that parallel the influence some commentators (see above) attach to the concept of military masculinities. She suggests that:

The reluctance to identify clients as a subject of research perpetuates certain assumptions about the essential nature of prostitutes’ clients, reinforcing the idea of a “natural” male sex drive. . . . [I]t should be recognised that men’s use of prostitution is as much shaped by social and cultural processes as prostitution as a trade, and deserves equal rigor in its examination. (p. 43)

In moving from analysis that reifies exploitative forms of military masculinity, peacekeeper-prostitute clients might be seen as involved in oppressive social practices that mirror those of others (mainly men) in contexts shaped by deep cultural and economic inequalities. In this way, it is possible to see the social origins of military masculine sexual oppression in ways that do not simply frame those men involved as “mad” or “bad” (Price 2001) in a pathological sense but rather as negotiating a series of structural contingencies shaping their sexualized power-interactions with vulnerable others. In attempting to broaden our understanding of gendered power relations with respect to sexual exploitation, it is important to also consider the extent to which they experience a good deal of impunity in these activities.

**Gendering Impunity**

Impunity (*noun*): exemption from punishment or from the harmful consequences of an action. (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2001, 648)

Impunity has yet to receive the scholarly attention it deserves in discussions about peacekeeper exploitation and that perpetrated by others. Yet a significant factor underpinning sexual exploitation in geographically disparate regions by individuals from diverse backgrounds concerns the extent to which they feel and indeed experience impunity.34 To date, the number of peacekeepers punished for sexual exploitation remains inconsequential.35 A similar situation holds for the other perpetrators discussed here, with conviction rates barely reflecting the extensive scale of exploitation, particularly in the case of sex tourists.36

Peacekeeping operations, as microcosms of the UN culture of which they are a part, might be considered as masculinized in their constitution. Here, it has long been acknowledged that the context for exploiting peacekeepers is informed by the idea that “boys will be boys” in ways that implicitly condone such activities (Cockburn
and Hubic 2002). While the policies drafted by the UN Department of Peace Keeping Operations are both robust and uncompromising in tone, it has been argued that they are largely neutralized as a consequence of power relations rooted in tenacious gendered regimes. These regimes are also sustained through the nexus linking diplomatic relations with the UN’s need for resources. In this respect, a number of troop contributing countries occupy positions of relative power over the UN, because peacekeeping personnel are at something of a premium. Here, troop contributing countries might be seen to hold the UN to metaphorical ransom and could threaten to withdraw or fail to deploy their personnel if they feel aggrieved through the imposition of sanctions for peacekeepers who exploit. In turn, the UN may have little option but to accept predominantly male troops who arrive in-mission with little or no gender or cultural awareness training.

Furthermore, anecdotal evidence points to the considerable lengths to which some military commanders will go to thwart investigations of members of their peacekeeping forces when sexual exploitation is alleged—here, national military reputation could be prized above the interests of local people involved in commercial sex.

The component parts of impunity can be further disaggregated and include the extent to which a significant number of peacekeepers are deployed to isolated team or sector sites free of surveillance. In situations where commanders (both junior and senior) also partake in sexual exploitation (Spencer 2005), a geographically remote subculture might develop in which peacekeepers remain wholly unaccountable for their activities. In a more general sense, peacekeepers may also experience a “privilege of temporality,” acting in the knowledge that their time in-mission is finite and their involvement in sexual exploitation is unlikely to attract swift and decisive sanction. Here, they may reflect instrumentally on how best to negotiate the limited barriers to exploitation. This was also highlighted in the context of the current small-scale study in regard to the “Blue Helmets Code of Conduct” in place across the range of PSOs and adopted in minor ways to suit local conditions. The general sentiment from the peacekeeper element of the sample was that “it was just another piece of paper to put in your pocket.” While little credibility was attached to the code by many of those formally interviewed and others consulted informally, the idea that “sex with people under eighteen was prohibited” was widely articulated, although if (local women) were “of age,” it “was OK.” Participants tended to recall paragraph (b) of the stipulation, rather than paragraph (a), in which any exchange of resources for sex was understood to constitute sexual exploitation. The code of conduct in operation in Sierra Leone was similarly worded, giving rise to a convergence in opinion about the relative unacceptability of having “sex with those under eighteen years of age,” while those over eighteen were seen as altogether more legitimate partners in commercial sex. The wording of the code in reference to a bona fide relationship also provided for a degree of ambiguity, because definitions of such a relationship would be difficult to determine. By the end of the fieldwork in the DRC (April 18, 2003, many months after the mission had started), the code of conduct in
the DRC was awaiting translation into French from English, thereby remaining inaccessible to many peacekeepers and local people.

Conclusions

In this article, I have reported on and discussed findings from a brief period of exploratory fieldwork in sub-Saharan Africa. My concern in this pilot study has been to delve a little deeper into the ways in which those peacekeeper clients noted to exchange goods or services for sex with local women and/or girls made sense of such activities. How did they and others who worked and lived alongside them understand what should be seen as an exemplar of gendered power relations? The data suggest that the commercial sexual exchanges between peacekeepers and local women and girls tended to be considered in terms of an equitable interaction, stripped of their socioeconomic and power context. It is in this (apparent) relational parity that the unquestioned masculinized biological sex drive was noted to render peacekeepers vulnerable to advances made by enthusiastic women seeking goods or services for sex. In this way, the dominant framing of a predatory masculinity in pursuit of a passive femininity was reinscribed in ways that further reinforce a narrative of mutuality in exchange. Additionally, there was some reflection on the financial dimension of peacekeeper-local female interactions that reinforce the idea that members of the latter group were exercising power over the negotiation process. Here, the limited control used by women involved in commercial sex was conflated with their (illusory) exercise of power in ways discussed in the context of prostitution more widely (O’Connell Davidson 1998). It is possible that these findings have policy relevance, since they can be fed into gender sensitivity training strategies. For example, premission and in-mission training directed toward peacekeeping and civilian UN personnel might seek to encourage newly deployed personnel to get beyond the image of working girls freely choosing to solicit them for commercial sex.

While the study has provided a tentative insight into the relatively neglected inner world of the peacekeeper-perpetrator and how others might frame him, findings presented in this article could also have something to say about the continued tendency by both laypeople and analysts to reify the concept of masculinity. In this way, study participants, when asked to comment on exploitation, made both explicit and implicit appeal to a deeply embodied masculinity seen as foundational to social practice. In the example of the scholarly accounts discussed above, military masculinity was held to offer a disproportionate explanatory potential in the context of a somewhat two-dimensional agency. In this understanding, peacekeepers’ exploitation of local women flowed from their military masculinities. In effect, the perspectives of both commentaries (lay and scholarly) serve to “amputate” (Plummer 1983) peacekeepers from their broader social settings. However, in broadening the context of exploitation, it is possible to identify commonality of gendered practice across
different locations—involving military and nonmilitary men—that lead to a consider-
ation of the socially productive influence of impunity, for example. Here, the inter-
section of gender with socioeconomic context and power may offer a more persuasive 
explanatory framework than that preoccupied with what military men “are like.” 
More usefully, it could be said that these men’s gendered practices can be seen in 
terms of global structures (Connell 2004, 72), giving rise to particular forms of 
(oppressive) social masculinities. Even if some analysts might see peacekeeper sex-
ual exploitation as evidence of a hegemonic military or militarized masculinity, this 
“hegemonic form need not be the most common form of masculinity” (ibid., 35). 
Though there is little doubt that the feminine other plays a crucial role in constitut-
ing gender power relations in the military, a number of (male) members might find 
such hierarchies inappropriate and fail to live up to them by resisting the ways in 
which women might be accorded a subordinate status. Finally, drawing on the point 
made by Connell above, it would be interesting in this closing discussion to pose the 
counterfactual: How might we explain military men—even those associated with the 
more extreme elements of hypermasculinity in the combat arms—who have never 
been involved in the sexual exploitation of others? As Connell (2002, 35) suggests, 
the existence of a violent or aggressive masculinity, “even within a single institution” 
is unlikely to be the only form present. Indeed, as one strand of a longer term strat-
egy for peace, responses to this question may be particularly revealing (ibid., 34) as 
they move from the local to the global and in so doing engage with a social mas-
culinity in both its complexity and generality.

Notes

1. I use the shorthand term local women throughout the article, although it should be acknowledged 
that this category may well include internally displaced people. In addition, though there is some evidence 
of the sexual exploitation of boys and men in peace support operations (PSO); Rehn and Sirleaf (2002), 
I do not deal with that matter here.

2. My concern in this article is with male peacekeepers deployed on the UN mission from their 
national militaries. I do not discuss other uniformed peacekeepers, for example, UN draftees working as 
part of the police force.

3. A number of peacekeepers in my own study (Higate 2004) made comments along these lines. See 
also Cockburn and Hubic (2002) with respect to peacekeepers and prostitutes in Bosnia (pp. 103-21).

forces. These acts delay, and in some cases, impede the construction of enduring peace” (p. 170).

5. See http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,3604,1445537,00.html (accessed December 8, 
2005).

6. With respect to the stigma attached to the label of prostitute in the context of the PSO in Cambodia 

7. It is commonly assumed that the direction of infection is from prostitute to peacekeeper. However, 
the high rate of infection among a number of national militaries and their peacekeeping forces challenges 
also: Heinecken (2003).
8. In my own period of fieldwork (different from that presented in this article) during March and April 2005, it was clear that a significant number of Liberian citizens expressed considerable gratitude toward the UN’s presence and the security it brought.

9. See Krishnasamy (2001) for evidence detailing the attempt of local people to encourage the UN to extend the deployment of particular battalions. However, NATO’s stabilization force in Bosnia, while providing a number of positive interventions, has been described as superficially successful when considered from the perspective of women’s groups working with SFO (Stabilization Force) (Cockburn and Hubic 2002, 107).

10. Between 1948 and 2005, the UN suffered 2,070 fatalities among its peacekeeping forces. See http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/fatalities/totals_annual.htm (accessed December 8, 2005). Shortly after I left the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) after completing my fieldwork there, I received information that one of my peacekeeper participants had been killed. His brain and other organs had been removed and cannibalized.

11. However, military personnel are noted to take part in tragic and bloody events, including most infamously the Mai Lai massacre in which soldiers went on a frenzied killing spree of children, women, and men. Ultimately, these events are dysfunctional for the military but continue to happen with disturbing frequency. The atrocities committed in Falluja—yet to be satisfactorily revealed—might represent a further example (see http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1471011,00.html).

12. Whitworth (2004) dedicates a chapter in her otherwise insightful volume to a discussion of “militarized masculinities and blue berets” (pp. 151-81). In it, she paints a somewhat crude picture of (the apparent) totalizing effects of military masculine socialization on military men. In reading her analysis, one is left with the sense that military masculine socialization has the power to reduce military men to little more than automatons, a proposition that has been disputed by a number of scholars, including John Hockey (1986), who demonstrates resistance to military socialization in his ethnography of infantry training. It should be remembered that “making soldiers” is far from a straightforward process (see Note 13).

13. I agree with Bob Connell that militaries exert energetic efforts to produce a narrowly defined hegemonic masculinity. However, the extent to which they are successful in these endeavors is less than clear-cut. Although Krebs (2004) is not concerned with gender, his work demonstrates the challenges faced by militaries in successfully socializing military personnel.

14. Commentators continue to suggest that a diverse range of social phenomena—from homelessness through alcohol misuse to the use of violence—can be explained by military masculine pathology. Social reality is considerably messier than this, as work exploring the links between service in the army and rough sleeping has shown (Higate 2001).

15. See Sherene Razack’s (2004) analysis of peacekeeper violence for a more sophisticated engagement with the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, and cultural context in shaping power relations.

16. Military observers known as milobs are constituted by the commissioned ranks from the three services—the air force, the navy, and the army. While their roles vary, the military peacekeeping personnel interviewed here were involved in patrolling and intelligence gathering in the DRC and Sierra Leone.

17. Thirty-four of these interviews were taped; all were recorded through note taking. On return to the UK, I transcribed them in an abbreviated notes and quotes form, prior to a manual thematization of recurrent topics.

18. Like the ex-soldier John Hockey (1986), who carried out an ethnography of British infantry recruits, I also chose—where I considered appropriate—to ask naïve questions about peacekeepers’ relationships with local women. This provided me with a strategy to check for accuracy as well as appeal to peacekeepers’ desire to educate me about their activities.

19. My recent fieldwork trip to the PSO in Liberia (the findings of which are currently being analyzed) confirms the findings presented in the current article with regard to the ongoing situation of certain peacekeepers’ exploitation of younger females in the postconflict setting. See Save the Children, UK (2006).

20. Portakabins are temporary buildings.
21. Prostitution was noted to move from a hidden to a visible phenomenon after the PSO was deployed to Cambodia (Whitworth 1998, 178). This begs the question of whether prostitution’s higher profile might contribute to awareness-raising of usually hidden gendered inequality, though clearly, any growth in prostitution represents a retrograde development as far as gendered relations go.

22. The advertising slogan of Vodacom is *toujours plus fort*. Literally translated from the French, this means “all powerful.”

23. These periods of masculinized banter provided a rich resource of data, framed as they were by gentle teasing within the context of the maintenance of soldierly camaraderie. Interestingly, female peacekeepers were present in some situations, although only occasionally did they seek to challenge this gendered talk.

24. The idea of a biological sex drive is inflected by military masculine ideology in particular ways. To deny military men their sexual “safety valve” is to court serious problems, in which hetero-normative practice might become corrupted. Beliefs shaping military masculine culture turn on the idea that denial of sex could result in a significant diminution in combat effectiveness, for example. It is alleged that in the absence of heterosexual activity, military men are unable to affirm all aspects of their warrior-hood. Unscientific theories are perpetuated by both civilian and military men about testosterone levels and potential for aggression, although there is little credible empirical evidence to support such a proposition (Connell 1995).

25. The age of consent is fourteen years in the DRC and Sierra Leone.

26. This statement refers to the US$138 mission subsistence allowance paid daily to military observers and other more senior UN civilians.

27. The female participants who spoke of these experiences were unsure of the nationality of the militia who raped them.

28. During a recent fieldtrip to the PSO in Liberia, I was confronted by an off-duty peacekeeper in the bar of a hotel excitedly waving a US$10 bill. He loudly suggested to the gathered audience of military colleagues sipping their cooled beers that “if I can get a blow job for one buck, imagine what this will buy me!” In a context in which he was in receipt of many thousands of dollars a month, in contrast to the tens of dollars a month for Liberian citizens (or less), this moment underlined the gulf of empathy between profoundly unequal partners in the sexualized global marketplace.

29. Resources supplied by the UN to its own staff often leak out into the local black market. It is not uncommon to see (UN-supplied) bottles of water, UN maps, and UN blue paint being sold by local market traders who display remarkable entrepreneurial acumen within the harsh postconflict setting. Thus, it is entirely possible that the peacekeeper was angered at the sense that he was forced to buy back the water originally intended for UN staff, though in no way does this excuse his display of masculine rivalry.


31. See http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/article/detail/957 (accessed December 9, 2005).

32. Sex tourists have been argued to include domestic and foreign businessmen, domestic and foreign tourists, seamen, hippy and drug tourists, expatriates, “hardened” sex tourists, pedophiles, preferential child sex abusers, male homosexual sex tourists, and female sex tourists (O’Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor 1995, 2).

33. An emerging literature has challenged the tendency to pathologize sex tourists. (For a useful review, see Cabezas [2004].)

34. I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for encouraging me to emphasize the role of impunity in this article.

35. I have contacted the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations on numerous occasions via e-mail to establish the numbers of peacekeepers sanctioned for sexually exploitative activities with local people; they have yet to respond. Anecdotally at least, there appear to be few if any examples of sanctions, aside from the unusual repatriation of peacekeeping personnel to their home countries. The possibility that peacekeepers might be court-martialed in-mission has been mooted but seems unlikely given the logistic and diplomatic sensitivities of such a move (Zeid 2005). A UN insider close to these issues (known to the author) has suggested that to her knowledge, peacekeeper sanctioning for sexual exploitation is a “rare event.”

37. As Fetherston (1995, 23) argues, “They [commanders] have distinguished themselves by their unwillingness to punish those responsible or to take steps to ensure such behavior is not repeated. The lack of action suggests collective head nodding of male dominated upper echelons of diplomatic and military corps.” However, there is increasing awareness of the masculine culture of the UN, particularly since implementation of UN Resolution 1325.

38. The frequent request that troop-contributing countries provide a greater proportion of female peacekeepers has largely fallen on deaf ears and is a case in point that the UN has to take whatever it can get.

39. In Sierra Leone, the provost marshal investigates allegations of military personnel misdemeanors (including sexual exploitation), thereby keeping the allegations in-house, while the civil police investigate allegations against civilians. As of mid-May 2003, the telephone hotlines, established a number of months previously for members of the local community who wished to complain about sexual exploitation (and other issues), remained unused (Higate 2004).

40. Numerous examples of collusion between commanders and subordinates with sexual exploitation have been documented. For example, witnessed in my own work and that of others was the advice given to UN personnel to park their vehicles away from the “out of bounds” bars and hotels they frequented (Higate 2004; Whitworth 1998, 179).

41. The same reviewer provided me with this insightful phrase (see Note 34).

42. The relevant elements of the code in place in the DRC at the time of data collection were as follows: “For the purpose of this memorandum, an act of sexual abuse and/or exploitation is defined as: a) Any exchange of money, employment, goods, or services for sex, including sexual favours or other forms of humiliating, degrading, or exploitative behaviour. The public solicitation of any such act shall be considered as an aggravating circumstance; b) Any sexual activity with a person under the age of 18. The mistaken belief in the age of the person cannot be considered as a defence. This provision shall not apply to national staff . . . involved in a bona fide relationship in respect of Congolese national law and customs; and/or c) Any other sexual misconduct that has a detrimental effect on the image, credibility, impartiality, or integrity of the United Nations.”


44. Sarah Martin (2005, 34) reports that “in 2002, an Irish soldier was caught making pornographic films of Eritrean women. The main woman in the film said that she was the Irish soldier’s girlfriend and that they planned to marry.”

References


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