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A member of the Kosovo force destroys a confiscated weapon © UN Photo/Robert E

•What are the effects of peacekeeping economies on the women and men living in areas where they operate?

•How effective has UN policy been in curbing the ill effects of these economies and how can efforts be improved?

Peacekeeping Economies and the Sex Industry: Implications for UN Gender Policy

Summary: ‘Peacekeeping economies’ have not been subjected to much analysis. This is partly, perhaps, because their effects have been assumed to be temporary. In reality, such economies often have impacts on local societies that endure long after peacekeepers have left. This briefing considers the gendered effects of peacekeeping economies in Bosnia, Kosovo, Liberia and Haiti, focussing especially on the sex industry. It then examines the effectiveness of the UN’s efforts to curb sexual exploitation and to promote gender equality through peacekeeping operations. It argues that the UN needs to go beyond policies based on individual responsibility, to consider the wider context in which its operations take place.

Introduction

“Peacekeeping economies” have not been subject to much analysis of either their economic or socio-cultural and political impacts. This is perhaps understandable, as peacekeeping economies are ill-defined, and often overlap with organised crime and the business interests of powerful local actors. There may also be a perception that these economies are incidental to the objectives of peacekeeping missions and thus of limited relevance, or that they are inevitable and thus unremarkable.

Yet the peacekeeping economy is the context in which most local residents have their main contact with civilian and military person-

nel in peace operations. The distortions and excesses of peacekeeping economies, and the services and activities they encompass, help shape local perceptions of the mission (and vice versa), and of the roles, relations, and status of local citizens vis-à-vis international personnel. Inevitably, they also affect relations between women and men.

This briefing uses a gendered lens to explore some ramifications and lasting implications of peacekeeping economies, drawing on examples from four post-conflict countries with past or ongoing United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Liberia, and Haiti. It discusses the effects of the UN’s ‘zero-tolerance

policy’ towards sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by UN personnel, and how the UN could increase its effectiveness in limiting the negative impacts of peacekeeping economies.

The characteristics of ‘peacekeeping economies’

The term ‘peacekeeping economies’ was first coined to refer to the industries and services (e.g. hotels, bars, restaurants, transportation) that spring up when a peacekeeping operation comes into an area, cater primarily to international actors, provide some jobs for locals, and depend on the custom and cash supplied by the operation and associated international presence.

In this briefing, the term is also used to encompass the skilled, semi-skilled, or unskilled jobs available to local staff in UN offices or associated non-governmental organizations (NGOs); unskilled and mainly informal work such as housework, running errands, etc for international staff; along with “voluntary” or “forced” participation in the sex industry, whether independently or mediated through a third party (e.g. pimp, madam).

Insofar as peacekeeping economies are discussed in policy literature, they are often seen as problematic – owing to their inflationary impact on the cost of living and the local housing market, and the distortionary effects of the “local hire syndrome” – but are also generally perceived of as temporary. This perception obscures the fact that, for many, peacekeeping economies provide a crucial source of income. However, this does not mean that peacekeeping economies affect everyone equally, benignly, or beneficially.

Notably, many of the activities encompassed by peacekeeping economies can be considered as comprising specifically “women’s work” – and this also includes the large majority of people working in the sex industry. A significant aspect of peacekeeping economies in many contexts is that they are characterized by, and to a certain extent dependent upon, the sexual availability of local residents for international actors: whether freely, for a contracted fee, or for some form of in-kind payment(s).

The sex industry and peacekeeping economies in Bosnia and Kosovo

In Bosnia and Kosovo, domestic sex work and sex trafficking have become a seemingly permanent part of the post-war and post-peacekeeping economy. The peacekeeping missions in both countries significantly affected the sex industry on

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both the supply and demand sides, effectively creating or expanding avenues for the trafficking of women for sexual exploitation into and through these areas. The peacekeeping economy thus affected the entire region, making Bosnia and, later, Kosovo, predominantly destination sites for trafficked women.

The prevalence of rape and sexual slavery in Bosnia during the war is well known; and during this period, there are also documented cases of UN soldiers that, far from helping the victims, were clients and users of their “services” (Gutman 1994). In the years immediately following the war (1996 to 2003), the wartime phenomenon of rape camps filled with local women was replaced by brothels filled with foreigners from Eastern Europe, in order to fulfil the demand of thousands of international peacekeepers and various other staff of international organisations. A similar phenomenon was later seen in Kosovo.

Importantly, international military and civilian personnel were implicated in the sex industry in Bosnia and Kosovo from an early stage – not just as users of prostitution, but also as active participants in trafficking networks. This part of the peacekeeping economy was closely connected to organised crime, which is a significant source of income and employment, and of which human trafficking for sexual exploitation is an important component. Peacekeeping economies thus played a major role in creating an illegal labour market related to sex work and sex trafficking (and fuelled largely by international demand), and led to a sizable contingent of people – predominantly men, but also some women – who became used to earning money through

jobs created by organized crime.

This illicit economy has endured in spite of peacekeeping troops being withdrawn or reduced, for a number of reasons. It is partly because, once the demand for sexual services is reduced, the supply can easily be shifted in other directions by those controlling and profiting from the trade. Recent data on sex-trafficking in Bosnia shows that women continue to be both imported and exported, demonstrating that the local demand created by these industries has not abated (Government of Bosnia-Herzegovina 2006). It also reflects the economic desperation that many Bosnian (and other) women continue to find themselves in, which prompts them to turn to illegal channels for work.

The socio-cultural condition of women in post-war and (post-) peacekeeping society is another important reason why the sex industry has been difficult to dislodge. The retraditionalisation of women’s roles in popular culture is part of this problem, with the message often conveyed in the media that beauty is the most valuable female asset. This is coupled with a resurgence of “traditional” masculinity among those men who have become rich or successful in these societies, with the image of men as a breadwinner but also as a combatant: a tough and omnipotent man accompanied by a passive and sexually attractive woman. Cultural images of women as sex objects have thus become a strong contributing factor for neutralizing, and even glorifying, the seamy side of trafficking and prostitution. The Bosnia and Kosovo cases therefore demonstrate the fallacy of assuming that peacekeeping economies’ impacts are temporary,



A UN peacekeeper in Haiti © Henrietta Lunde

or confined to economic flows, booms and busts. Rather, the effects are lasting, diverse, and dispersed, and have been intrinsic to ongoing and regressive changes in gender identities, roles, and relations.

Learning the lesson? Peacekeeping economies in Liberia and Haiti and the new gender awareness

The Bosnia and Kosovo missions predate, at least in their inception, a more recent emphasis on gender by the UN. This is epitomized by Resolution 1325 (2000) and Resolution 1820 (2008) on Women, Peace and Security, as well as other recent moves to mainstream gender and promote gender equality in and through UN peacekeeping operations, as well as to reduce some negative impacts of peacekeeping economies – namely through the zero-tolerance policy. This prompts the question: is the link between peacekeeping economies and sex industries still valid in light of more dedicated efforts within the UN system on gender awareness and equality?

On the basis of anecdotal evidence and observation in Haiti and Liberia, this link remains durable. Both Port-au-Prince and Monrovia have developed robust entertainment infrastructures catering to peacekeepers and other international actors and local elites.

In Haiti, Port-au-Prince has a highly visible street prostitution market, while the higher end of the market

is seemingly concentrated in clubs, brothels, or restaurants, where there is also evidence of women from the Dominican Republic being trafficked. In Liberia, while the street prostitution market is less visible in Monrovia than Port-au-Prince, the market itself otherwise seems to share similar characteristics, including trafficking explicitly linked to demand generated by the peacekeeping economy.

Several factors seem to favour the post-peacekeeping perpetuation of these sex industries, if in modified form – including possibly in the direction of sex tourism. These factors include the existence of an entertainment infrastructure; the many beaches and a tropical climate; the continued economic desperation of the populace, especially women; a pro-tourism policy on the part of state actors and permissive state policies towards the sex industry. In Haiti's case, while the 2010 earthquake has likely scuttled any immediate attempts to attract "adventure tourists" to the island, the dramatic influx of aid and humanitarian workers, combined with the extremity of the circumstances in which many people now live, has likely only intensified the dynamics of the peacekeeping economy.

The impact of the UN's zero-tolerance policy on the sex industries in Liberia and Haiti is debatable. While it seems to have curbed some of the worst excesses of sexual exploitation and abuse, especially in Liberia, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which these have simply been driven underground. Certainly it has not sounded the death knell for the entertainment infrastructure in either Monrovia or Port-au-Prince – which, to be fair, is not the policy's intention, nor can it be a reasonable expectation.

Simply put, the zero-tolerance policy – and mission codes of conduct,

into which it is increasingly integrated – is unable to deal with the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse on anything other than an individual level, with application and sanctions restricted to UN personnel. This focus on the responsibilities of the individual peacekeeper is, in part, an expression of the political and legal constraints under which the UN operates. Yet the UN's effectiveness in acting on a key issue relating to gender and peacekeeping economies is arguably undercut by its inability to see the problem as systemic, and embedded in a particular political economy in which the organization itself is an active participant. The UN treats sexual exploitation and abuse on the part of its personnel as a bug, not a feature. This may be an overly optimistic view of the problem.

UN informants in both Liberia and Haiti frequently expressed the view that the zero-tolerance policy was virtually impossible to credibly and consistently enforce. Several arguments suggested the normalization of the context established by the peacekeeping economy: that transactional sex was just the way of life in this environment; that it did not do anyone any harm; and that mission life itself was an excuse to act in ways that one would refrain from at home.

In such an environment, where activities and behaviour that, in different contexts, may be considered aberrant become normalized and (at least tacitly) accepted, the dependence on individuals to refrain from acting inappropriately is likely to be inadequate. Yet with such scatter-shot enforcement of the zero-tolerance policy, this dependence on the propriety (or at least, discretion) of individuals occupies a central role in the UN's "fight" against SEA.

Conclusion

A unifying principle of UN peacekeeping operations is the goal of mainstreaming gender and integrating gender perspectives within and through operations, with the ultimate goal of achieving gender equality. This is an admirable goal, and its achievement has been attempted in a number of important ways, including establishing gender units and advisers, promoting the presence of more women peacekeepers, as well as outward-focussed efforts to support institutional reform in favour of gender equality in target countries.

Yet there seems to be a fundamental mismatch between the organization's goals of mainstreaming gender and promoting gender equality, and its participation in and perpetuation of a peacekeeping economy that has concrete and often negative impacts on the local women and men it encompasses. It is important to note that the context in which these efforts are being made matters; and, in the regressive changes that the peacekeeping economy can entail, it has the potential to undermine more positive changes being attempted in specific sectors within or outside the mission.

The failure of international actors to think critically, and act responsibly, about the highly gendered implications of their presence – both in terms of the overall political economy but also, more directly, in terms of human lives and welfare in peacekeeping areas – implicates them in the negative effects of that presence, in the same way that they are associated with the positive outcomes of peacekeeping. While the UN may ultimately decide that it is incapable of more systematic action to reign in peacekeeping economies, the possible negative ramifications of those economies should be addressed early, openly, and directly, and factored in to eventual decision-making on the part of both the mission and national authorities.

Credits

This Policy Briefing was written by Kathleen Jennings, Researcher on MICROCON's Project 9, 'Sexual Violence During and In the Shadows of War' and Researcher at the Fafu Institute of Applied International Studies. A more detailed analysis of these issues can be found in MICROCON Research Working Paper 17 (see below).

The views expressed in this briefing are the author's alone.

Further reading

Gutman, R., 1994. *Svedok genocida (Witness of Genocide)*, Zagreb: Durieux.

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