

Chantel Cole

Power, Violence & Agency: Understanding Sex Between Women & Girls in Haiti & United Nations Peacekeepers

The United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations currently has 110,000 peacekeepers deployed in 14 operations around the world, including in Haiti, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Lebanon, Mali, South Sudan, and Kosovo. According to the UN, the role of peacekeepers and its peacekeeping missions at large is to assist countries in “navigating the difficult path from conflict to peace”. UN peacekeeping missions are especially ascribed with the objective of protecting civilians within host states from conflict-related sexual violence which includes instances or patterns of sexual violence – rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization or any additional forms of sexual violence. Despite all of this, studies show that a vast number of peacekeepers have been embroiled in and perpetrated the very acts they were commissioned to protect civilians from. During the past 12 years of UN peacekeeping missions globally, there have been 2,000 allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by peacekeepers and other personnel. Over the past five years alone, 612 allegations have been made; experts believe this is likely only the tip of the iceberg.

The continued emergence of allegations coupled with increased media scrutiny and public outcry prompted the UN to implement a ‘zero-tolerance’ policy which bans peacekeepers from sexually exploiting and abusing beneficiaries. More broadly, however, it prohibits *all* relationships between peacekeepers and beneficiaries no matter the nature of the relationship¹. The reason for this absolute ban over relationships is because the UN states that any interaction between a peacekeeper and beneficiary is always based on an unequal power dynamic. The UN assumes that the presence of a power dynamic always means beneficiaries who are involved in sexual interactions with peacekeepers are automatically exploited, powerless, and without agency. Despite this absolute ban, disturbing allegations of abuse against beneficiaries continue to emerge.

Where I am in agreement with the UN is that there indeed exists an unequal power dynamic. I challenge, however, the assumption that this power dynamic always and automatically means all beneficiaries involved in sexual relations with peacekeepers are abused, exploited, powerless, victimized, and without agency. Instead, it is important to look at the micro-level to see how power is operating within these interactions and how beneficiaries are exercising *their own* agency and power. This is something the literature has not paid enough attention to. Moreover, while the term ‘sexual exploitation and abuse’, is helpful in identifying a particular form of misconduct, employing it as an umbrella term– as the UN and much of the literature on sex between peacekeepers and locals often does– obscures the significant differences and nuances between different behaviours and interactions. Indeed, the use of the term ‘SEA’ by the UN and within the literature on sexual misconduct by peacekeepers offers a narrow understanding of the different dynamics of sexual relations between peacekeepers and locals. The dominant discussion– whether coming from the UN, media outlets, or other sources– does not necessarily reflect the diversity of experiences on the ground. As this project aims to demonstrate, the situation on the ground is complex, much more complex than a one-size-fits all policy like the zero tolerance policy and terms like SEA make it out to be. It cannot be said enough how critical it is to privilege the voices

and experiences of those involved in and impacted by sexual interactions with peacekeepers. This is imperative if we genuinely desire to come up with appropriate responses and interventions that will protect, respect, and truly empower local populations.

Given this, in focusing on the experiences of women and girls in Haiti who have had sexual interactions with peacekeepers deployed as part of the Stabilization Mission in Haiti (known by its French acronym MINUSTAH) I ask the following questions: how can we capture a comprehensive understanding of the nature and dynamics of interactions between peacekeepers and beneficiaries? How can the way beneficiaries interpret *their* experiences help us understand the nuances of these relationships and develop effective interventions? To answer these questions, I pursue a people-centered analysis by examining the interactions between peacekeepers and beneficiaries at a micro-level and suggest that although there indeed exists a power dynamic, power is operating within these interactions in distinct and nuanced ways that is not always one-sided. I do this by analyzing first-hand accounts by women and girls in Haiti who have engaged in sexual interactions with MINUSTAH peacekeepers. This data was collected by a team of local researchers in Haiti in 2017. By developing an original typology, I disaggregate and categorize sexual encounters between peacekeepers and locals into what I call a ‘power-relationship’ typology in order to ascertain the nature, dynamics, and nuances of these interactions. The categories of this typology are ‘Violent Power’, ‘Reward Power’ and ‘Neutralized Power’. Overall, my approach emphasizes that we cannot paint the story of sex between peacekeepers and locals with one broad brush; my analysis demonstrates that the situation on the ground is complex and encompasses various elements including violence, exploitation, power and agency. To tell this story, I reject a bird’s-eye view and instead, bring us to the ground.

In the first section of this project, I review the literature on sexual misconduct in peacekeeping missions and identify the gaps within the literature and use this as the rationale for my project. Next, I identify critical and postcolonialism feminism as the values that are the foundation of this project and subsequently develop the theoretical framework (my ‘power-relationship’ typology) I use to carry out this study. Subsequently, I explain the methodology used for this project and follow with a discussion on my positionality as well as ethical considerations for doing this type of work. Following this, I provide a historical, social, political and economic analysis of Haiti to contextualize the MINUSTAH mission and this study. Next, I present my case study and use my theoretical framework to understand and analyze sexual interactions between MINUSTAH peacekeepers and women and girls in Haiti. Finally, I end the project by discussing implications and providing recommendations for ways forward.

The research done here, and particularly the recommendations provided, can be mobilized in collaboration with local organizations and communities to support, protect, and empower women and girls in Haiti. Furthermore, there are several recommendations for programs and policies that could be pursued by policymakers, practitioners, and community organizations that can make tangible differences for the lives and situations of people in Haiti. Sex between peacekeepers and beneficiaries, specifically the sex that happens because of toxic ideologies, violence, coercion, and destitution, is a daunting problem. But it is one that is absolutely possible to rectify through a collaborative process towards creating a just and equitable world where “vulnerable” populations are vulnerable no more.