

UN Peacekeeping in Africa: A Critical Examination and Recommendations for Improvement

by *Kwame Akonor*

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The book titled ‘UN Peacekeeping in Africa: A Critical Examination and Recommendations for Improvement’, authored by Kwame Akonor,² lays out a significant overview of the UN peace operations in the African region. The argument of this book revolves around those circumstances where the peacekeepers themselves become the perpetrators of crime; thereby, this book represents the ‘dark side’ of the U.N. peacekeeping, which remains a fundamental problem in jeopardizing the future of peacekeeping. By reviewing the reports and publications on UN Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA),³ Akonor discusses four factors regarding why abuses occur and why the abusers barely face criminal prosecution. The paramount factor in the book is the prevailing hyper-masculinity in the military culture and the tendency to protect each other against civilian complaints. The other two factors include the economic deprivation and variation in the legal and cultural system among the Troop Contributing Countries (TCC). Finally, the physical and psychological repercussions of conflict on civilians expose them to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA).

In one of the chapters (i.e., The Dark Side of UN Peacekeeping), the author examines the instances of abuse in four peacekeeping operations stretching across the continent: Congo (MONUC, MONUSCO), Darfur (AMIS, UNAMID), Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL, UNAMSIL), and Somalia (UNOSOM I, UNITAF, UNOSOM II, and AMISOM). In addition, the chapter notes the cases of SEA in the contexts of Liberia and Haiti, where the observed cases were more of an incidence of transactional sex and sexual relationships between the peacekeepers and locals. The author unveils the pervasive nature of sexual exploitation and abuse of women and children and

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² *Professor Kwame Akonor* is an eminent scholar of International Relations and the founding Director of a New York based think tank, the African Development Institute.

³ UN Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA): <https://www.un.org/preventing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/>

highlights the circumstances and measures under which peacekeepers are needed to be ‘disciplined’.

Furthermore, the U.N. responses against SEA are examined along with *what* is lacking and *how* we can promote a culture of accountability and justice. With regards, the measures adopted by the United Nations — such as the Zero-tolerance Policy towards SEA, the Zeid Report, and the Report by the Group of Legal Experts (GLE) — are accentuated as a guide to follow. The United Nations also created the Conduct and Discipline Unit (CDU) under the Department of Field and Services (DFS) to streamline the SEA complaint process.

Akonor then draws on the lessons learned from the study and makes policy recommendations for future discourse and actions. According to the author, the ethos of accountability and ending impunity requires a system both at the levels of the United Nations and the TCCs, holding the perpetrators accountable and observing the psychological and systemic activities that give rise to such misconduct(s). The author enunciates the significance of Brecher’s concept of decision making in operational and psychological environments to observe the behaviors or misconducts of the peacekeepers under the aforementioned circumstances.

Although the book is thematically committed to analyzing SEA regarding women and children in conflict-torn countries, it lacks presenting inclusive dynamics for women in these areas. The only instance the author mentioned a pragmatic outlook for women was to include them in ‘blue helmets’ in a peacekeeping mission to counter the gender imbalance. Indeed, the argument broadens the scope of peacekeeping missions within the framework of gender mainstreaming; nevertheless, increasing women participation in the peacekeeping ranks cannot comprehend the broader challenges to Women Peace and Security (WPS). Such efforts are not enough to address the problems of SEA in peacekeeping operations or help eradicate its causes. Moreover, the subject matter of the host countries’ structural, socio-cultural, and economic conditions and their view on sexual violence should be taken into account.

It is also essential to advance the presented analysis by Akonor, considering significant developments in recent years on PSEA under the U.N. framework. For instance, in 2017, the United Nations outlined four methods to prevent and respond to SEA across the U.N. system and established a ‘Trust Fund in Support of Victims’ of SEA to financially assist the survivors and the children. Moreover, special measures are needed in the COVID-19 led situation, as the health crisis has significantly impacted the overall U.N. prevention and response mechanism. Nonetheless, Akonor’s recommendations must be taken into account, arguing that the long-term measures require serious consideration by the United Nations to create an ad hoc or even a permanent international tribunal or special court for SEA and to which the TCC’s would-be signatories. Overall, the book is a compelling read for multidisciplinary scholars concerned with the people-centered approach to UN peacekeeping.