

Violating Peace: Sex, Aid, and UN Peacekeeping

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‘Violating Peace: Sex, Aid, and Peacekeeping’ provides insights into the crucial yet understudied notion of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) prevalent in UN peacekeeping operations. Jasmine-Kin Westendorf deconstructs SEA practices and critiques the lack of accountability despite a decade of UN policy development designed to prevent them. She highlights the profound implications of SEA on the outcomes of peacekeeping operations and its credibility. Her book contributes to the scholarly and policy discussions about the challenges undermining peacekeeping and peacebuilding in conflict-ridden societies where SEA is at its apex.

Using SEA as a focal point, she has organized her book into four chapters. Chapter One underpins the historical traces of SEA that are often blurred due to the issue of ‘consent’ within the UN humanitarian code of conduct and the host state’s legal framework. She asserts that a lack of understanding of concepts and subsequent practical difficulties pave the way for the existing grey area of crime. This leads to a lack of appropriate responses to SEA. Therefore, the author suggests understanding the contexts within which the peace operations are deployed. She has stringently criticized the UN zero-tolerance policy, which has been viewed as defective by the staff, leading to further sexual exploitation cases. She further attempts to distinguish the variety of sexually exploitative behaviors to clarify the complexities attached to the consent factor, thus stressing the understanding of the overlapping challenges of peacekeeping missions to allow exploring appropriate solutions to address them.

Chapter two presents case studies of SEA in Bosnia and Timor Leste, revealing that the SEA was less related to the peacekeepers and more grounded in the consensual relationships, historical experiences, cultural practices and norms, material deprivation, and conflict-related sexual violence, which further blurred the line between the appropriate and inappropriate sexual exploitation. It is to be noted that the author has used decades-old case studies, which may not be relevant for academics or policymakers. Firstly, researching two distinct cases for revealing SEA issues requires extensive and context-specific investigation into aspects like the reported numbers,

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their fluctuations, etc.; only then may one draw comparisons; otherwise, the results can be misleading. Moreover, the author could have provided context-specific mission data interpretation and investigation before reaching generalized conclusions. Also, the relevance of anti-SEA policies seems outdated, as policy upgrades at the UN and its relevant agencies like UNHCR have been remarkable. For instance, the Victim-Centered Approach in UNHCR's response to SEA and sexual harassment was developed several years before launching in 2020.

Furthermore, the third chapter of the book zooms into a previously unexplored domain in research, that is, the longer-term impacts of SEA on the relationships between the civilian populations, troops-contributing countries, the UN, and the international community overall after using insights from the UN report that ruled out SEA as the highest risk and threat to implementing zero-tolerance policy.

The fourth chapter emphasizes the global implications of SEA beyond the special missions, highlighting how SEA can diminish the trust in peacekeeping and peacebuilding, create financial strains on UN projects and operations, and undermine moral authority, thus affecting UN credibility and capacity. Accordingly, she recommends that policymakers create robust rule-based plans, committed leadership, integrated policy between Women, peace and security, and SEA, and integrated training of peacekeepers.

However, it must be noticed that the UN's capacity and credibility are not at stake solely due to the SEA practices but the power politics of the UN veto members and their selective actions for global or regional conflicts and interventions. Hence, correcting the SEA-related accountability might not drastically lower the chances of already affected UN credibility. A more effective policy recommendation to ensure accountability involves avoiding UN involvement as a lead investigator or judge when peacekeepers face accusations. Therefore, including external actors to oversee it could have been suggested to ensure fairness. Similarly, it would have been better to suggest using advanced technologies for data interpretation or creating systems that could derive calculations on the SEA and its variants for policymakers to probe further.

The book serves as a valuable resource for understanding the impacts of SEA perpetrated by interveners. However, it must be noted that the author has profusely neglected the SEA perpetrated against men, which shows that her primary approach to SEA has been selective. She has stated that 'underreporting of cases of men' is the main reason; however, underreporting in the case of women has also been recognized as a practice.

Overall, the book uniquely sets an approach to addressing the issue of SEA by solely focusing on the impacts, which have been lacking in any other domain. Hence, it provides insights for policymakers to address the challenges that come along with peacekeeping operations.

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