

8 Gender, Race and the Politics of Peacekeeping*

Sandra Whitworth

Peacekeeping has been a central feature of UN activities for over thirty years, and yet one which has been relatively insulated from any form of critical scrutiny. The general disposition toward peacekeeping has been that it is, at a minimum, a benign use of military force. In part, this assumption depends upon the requirement that peacekeeping forces are brought into a situation with the consent of the parties involved and that they will fire only in self-defence. Those criticisms that exist around peacekeeping tend to focus on the question of whether a particular situation is suitable to peacekeeping efforts (i.e. Bosnia-Herzegovina), and potential 'inefficiencies' in particular elements of peacekeeping exercises, but not on the value and dynamic of peacekeeping itself. Moreover, there has been a renewed interest in peacekeeping, not only at the level of international organizations¹ and national governments, but within the popular media and general public as well. Too much of this attention has adopted uncritically and without careful examination the stance that peacekeeping is a viable and welcome alternative to other forms of military force.

Part of the argument of this chapter is that the favourable image associated with peacekeeping within the international community is not always supported by the events associated with actual missions. This chapter will examine two cases, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) and the Commission of Inquiry into the Deployment of Canadian Forces to Somalia, or, as it is more popularly known, the Somalia Inquiry. An examination of these two cases demonstrates that, as in any military mission, the relations of power informing peacekeeping missions are far more complex than a superficial reading of the peaceful and altruistic blue-bereted soldier reveals, and depend at least in part on important gendered and racialized distinctions. Those distinctions sometimes have enormous consequences for the people in countries in which peace-

keeping missions are deployed: in the Somalia example, two men were shot by Canadian peacekeepers and a third, Shidane Arone, was tortured and beaten to death; in Cambodia, accusations of sexual harassment, violence and abuse surround public perception of the UNTAC mission there. Under such circumstances, we must ask: if peacekeeping missions result in violence, sexual harassment and abuse, how *peaceful* the peacekeepers?

THE UNITED NATIONS TRANSITIONAL AUTHORITY IN CAMBODIA

The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia – UNTAC – is cited by the UN and regarded by many mainstream observers as something of a success story for the UN. William Shawcross, speaking at the general assembly of the International NGO Forum on Cambodia, called it an 'international triumph'² and UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali has written that the 'international community can take satisfaction from the peacekeeping operation it mounted and supported in Cambodia.'³

The success, achieved in an 18-month mission in Cambodia, included the reduction of violence, the repatriation of some 370,000 Khmer refugees, and the conduct of a relatively free and fair election in which some four million people, or 85 per cent of Cambodia's registered voters, participated.⁴ The UN claimed as well, again in the words of Boutros-Ghali, that the mission 'boosted Cambodia's economy by raising funds internationally for economic rehabilitation and expansion throughout the country.'⁵

The UNTAC effort also achieved some important successes with regard to women within Cambodia. Most notably, the freedom of association which prevailed in many respects during UNTAC and the efforts of UNIFEM to incorporate women's issues into the general election resulted in public education and information campaigns in the printed media and on radio and television. In addition a four-day National Women's Summit brought together Cambodian women from all sectors of society in order to identify and prioritize women's issues in order to lobby political parties contesting the election and then later the government itself.⁶ The Women's Summit has been credited with the emergence of an indigenous women's movement within Cambodia as well as a number of indigenous women's NGOs, which in turn have been credited with a very effective lobby of the

* I am grateful for the research assistance of Suzanne Baustad, V. Elaine Brown, Leslie Jeffrey and Nicole LaViolette. I am grateful also for financial support received from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.