At least since the 1990s, the question of whether and how states and other international actors, such as the United Nations, may use military force to end atrocities, protect human rights, and restrain violence has been a frequent topic of policy, legal, and philosophical debate. Philosophers have discussed peacekeeping operations, whether pursued under the traditional model of “humanitarian intervention” or under the newer concept of “responsibility to protect” (R2P), primarily in terms of the legitimacy of military intervention in sovereign nations. They have analyzed the problem of *jus ad bellum*, notably the question whether the defense of human rights could ever constitute a “just cause” for war.

A relatively unexplored, however, is the problem of *jus in bello*, that is, the way military forces, once introduced into an unstable and even treacherous region, should treat combatants and non-combatants, and even how they should distinguish between them. The commonplace attitude seems to be that, if it is moral to initiate a war to end an abuse of human rights, and if the abuser can be identified, then all we need know about the conduct of the military effort is that the cause is pursued in accord with the traditional principles of discrimination – soldiers should not intentionally target noncombatants – and of proportionality – any harm done by military acts should be comparable (at least roughly) to the gain to be had in peace and security.

This approach tends to obscure the moral and practical details of interventions into conflicts. There is a world of difference between a campaign limited to containing terrorism, for instance, and a United Nations peacekeeping operation (PKO) tasked with stabilizing a peace agreement. PKOs are particularly ill-served by a model designed for counter-terrorism campaigns or for clashes between two relatively equally matched organized militaries, where civilians are marginal to that conflict. Peacekeepers must not simply defeat an enemy, or even protect people from threats, but also bring civilians and combatants into a conversation with each other about the ethnic, economic, and other conflicts that divide them. Few writers have explicitly taken up the question of the moral obligations of peacekeepers as distinct from peacemakers.1

This article focuses on a particular question that besets peacekeepers: how can they best integrate their efforts to protect civilians from violence and abuse with what civilians are already doing to protect themselves? Civilians are not passive livestock to be killed or saved; they do not wait for international intervention before trying to pursue their own safety. One the one hand, their participation makes them critical allies for peacekeepers, offering information and capabilities beyond what international forces bring themselves. On the other hand, civilian organizations are always political actors in the sense of having positions within the social conflicts that gave rise to violence. Peacekeepers who ignore these allegiances may be drawn into conflicts as parties rather than provide background resources for resolving them. I will argue that the best peacekeepers can do is to provide a model of protection that makes it safe for members of groups in conflict to come together, rather than to protect civilians by separating them from threats. Along the way to this argument, I will also have something to say about what makes PKOs unique as military operations, and why they
require more than just a straightforward application of the standard just war framework.

Helping Civilians to Cope with the Threat of Violence

Between 2009 and 2011, with the help of two graduate students, I interviewed peacekeepers and their trainers, both in the field and at international institutions. We spoke with members of the Ghana Armed Forces in and around Accra, Ghana; with officials at the Rwandan Ministry of Defense in Kigali; with members of the UN peacekeeping mission (MONUC, at the time) in and around Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo; and with many other individuals involved in peacekeeping operations. This article, in particular, draws heavily on interviews my graduate student Susan Merrill and I conducted in July 2011 with Liberian women peacemakers (both those who had been active during the 1989-2003 civil wars and those who lived through the wars but joined the movement more recently). These interviews disabused me of any belief that mere force rather than collaboration and conversation could bring stability and peace to war-torn regions.

You could kill people with better weapons, but you could not bring them peace, which requires the creation of space for them to solve their problems. You cannot bomb people into reconciliation.

In one of my earliest interviews, I asked three Ghanian generals who had long peacekeeping experience and who seemed genuinely remorseful about the times they had not been able to protect people in the field whether it would have been an improvement had they had more military power at their command. They laughed at me. They told me that I must be an American to have asked the question that way – and they explained that you need to approach peacekeeping as a process of negotiation with the parties. You could kill people with better weapons, but you could not bring them peace, which requires the creation of space for them to solve their problems. You cannot bomb people into reconciliation. That conversation led me to try to analyze peacekeeping on its own terms, that is, in terms of the checkered history through which an interesting and valuable practice has emerged.

UN doctrine defines peacekeeping as “a technique designed to preserve the peace, however fragile, where fighting has been halted, and to assist in implementing agreements achieved by the peacemakers... It incorporates] a complex model of many elements – military, police and civilian – working together to help lay the foundations for sustainable peace.”

In contemporary practice and thinking, a key task of the military element in preserving and laying the foundations for peace is protecting civilians from violence. But PKOs undertaken by the UN (and other actors) were not initially mandated to protect civilians from violence. The United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda, for example, in its rules of engagement, authorized the use of force by peacekeepers only in self-defense. The report of the UN inquiry into the Rwandan 1994 genocide, however, cites with approval a comment by the Nigerian ambassador to the UN who stated that “too much attention was being paid to the cease-fire negotiations and too little to the massacres” and that “persistent attempts to view the situation in Kigali... as one where the cease-fire had broken down and therefore needed to be restored through negotiations, rather than one of genocide... [were] a costly error of judgment.” The UN report on the genocide noted that even if a peacekeeping operation is not explicitly mandated to protect civilians (which, at that time, most were not), many people both on the ground and in the international community will expect it to do so.

Robert Goodin, a philosopher at the Australian National University, has offered a moral argument on which one might base this expectation. Goodin points out that when people have the power to stop an injury, we quite reasonably hold them responsible for allowing it to go forward, even if they are not the original source of the threat. Goodin suggests a “last opportunity” rule for morality, on analogy with similar rules in the law: regardless of who else may be at fault, the person who passes up the last chance to avert some harm is in the wrong (at least unless there is some overriding reason to pass up that chance).3 So civilians are vulnerable, in Goodin’s sense, both to armed actors who would harm them and to peacekeepers who hold in their hands the power to stop those actors.
The literature in this area dwells on what peacekeepers and other military forces can and should do to protect civilians from death and other serious human rights abuses. What civilians do in their own behalf is often absent from these discussions. Protection, both in concept and in practice, must constitute a joint project in which civilians participate, one that regards civilians as active agents of their own and of each other’s security, not as passive victims or as helpless clients. It is no simple matter, however, for peacekeepers to enlist citizens in the effort to protect them, or vice versa, for citizens to enlist peacekeepers in that cause.

The perception that civilians are helpless in the face of physical violence results from too narrow a focus on the “point of impact,” where an armed group is threatening unarmed individuals right now. In such situations, there may be little for civilians to do besides flee if they can. This picture of immediate vulnerability obscures the role of PKOs in aiding strategies through which civilians cope with threats of violence more generally. Casey Barrs, a researcher at the Cuny Center, categorizes these longer-term coping strategies as involving avoidance, accommodation, and affinity.

Avoidance strategies are more or less what they sound like – in the most literal sense, individuals and communities simply move themselves out of the path of violence. Civilians who take their possessions with them (or, presumably, destroy them in place if they cannot be moved) strip looting actors of resources that may prove tempting or help fuel the conflict. As Barrs notes, there are less direct forms of avoidance as well. Communities that can find ways to provide for their own needs may avoid the influence of armed actors who control populations through access to food, water, etc.

Accommodation strategies lead vulnerable individuals to work with armed factions in some way, though this emphatically does not entail that civilians endorse them. They may bribe or cut deals with armed actors,
find connections with members of the faction who can be deflected from violence against the community, or work out understandings about who is a legitimate target and what how the noncombatant community should behave. Of course, deals like these are often inequitable or unpleasant, but communities may reasonably prefer them to open (and dangerous) defiance.

“Accommodation” has the ring of acceptance – it suggests civilians accede to armed actors’ goals as givens and learn to live with them. Barrs is clear that his use of the idea of accommodation is “not intended to carry a negative connotation;” it includes any non-violent interaction with armed factions, including many of the strategies pursued by the women whom I interviewed in Liberia, such as protesting and trying to appeal to various factions to join peace talks.6 It might be more accurate to distinguish peaceful protest from accommodation, even though they have in common that civilians deal with armed groups but do not themselves become combatants.

Barrs identifies a third category of affinity which encompasses strategies that rely on the connections and networks civilians build.7 The use of affinity groups and networks is a tactic that cuts across other strategies. Civilians use their affinity networks to facilitate both avoidance and accommodation. For instance, one interviewee explained to me that, prior to the outbreak of war in Sierra Leone, many Liberians who fled their country did not go to refugee camps but lived with extended family in Sierra Leone. In fact, it is hard to see how other strategies could be advanced without some use of social connections; the primary strength that civilians can bring to bear in the face of firepower is their own self-organization.

Some civilians may escape this taxonomy and deal with violence by becoming themselves armed combatants.8 Even though “women and children” is sometimes treated as a synonym for “noncombatant,” joining the ranks of the armed is a fairly common choice even for women and children. In Liberia, several women rose to notoriety as combatants, such as Martina Johnson and Black Diamond (and many more women fought without becoming in/famous). In other conflicts, women serve armed factions as everything from front-line combatants, to political leadership, to porters and “wives.”9 Many women are abducted or otherwise forced into service to an armed faction (even though some later come to identify with the faction), but others make an active choice to join.

In one focus group, women who had fought against the government gave the violence they had suffered (often sexual violence) at the hands of government forces as the most common reason for joining the opposition.10 We should not fall into the trap of thinking of “civilians” and “combatants” as completely different kinds of persons, when they are better seen as people caught in wider conflicts, some of whom have chosen to use violence, and perhaps more importantly, all of whom are part of the same social situation. In particular, while peacekeeping doctrine may focus on the protection of civilians, their own self-protection systems may crucially involve connections with combatants, and peacekeepers should be aware of how the strategies civilians adopt to protect themselves may impact positively or negatively on armed groups as well as on the actions of the peacekeepers themselves.

What Women Did in Liberia

The roots of Liberia’s civil wars reach back at least as far as the nineteenth-century project of returning freed US slaves to their “homeland” in Africa, thereby creating a class of Americo-Liberians who dominated local populations. The conflict had a more recent origin in Samuel Doe’s 1980 coup against the Americo-Liberian regime. The war began in earnest in 1989 when Charles Taylor invaded from Côte d’Ivoire at the head of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). The NFPL split early on into various factions, one led by Taylor’s former lieutenant, Prince Johnson – who would capture and kill Doe. The factions continued to fragment and the conflict destabilized Sierra Leone and drew in peacekeeping units, notably from the Economic Community of West African States, under the acronym ECOMOG. From 1993 on, ECOMOG was joined by a UN PKO, UNOMIL. The initial conflict drew to a close with 1997 elections, won by Taylor, but the nation remained unstable, and war reignited in 1999, ending in 2003 when Taylor and the main rebel groups signed a peace agreement. After the end of the second civil war, the UN deployed a new PKO, UNMIL, to help with the transition to a stable peace.

Throughout the wars, Liberian women played an active role in responding to violence. Much of what women did during the wars fell into Barrs’ category of
avoidance. Avoidance is, of course, not always a passive matter of hunkering down until violence passes. The wives and market women who crisscrossed Monrovia while many men hid inside were engaged in active strategies of economic and social survival at the same time as they dodged armed factions. But Liberian women also actively organized to promote peace, particularly during the second war. They met with warlords, protested, organized strikes and sit-ins, and attended international peace meetings.\textsuperscript{11}

On a more intimate scale, we heard stories of women who went out to get food while husbands hid at home, as well as men and women confronting families and elders about sexual violence in the community, sharing information about threats, and helping community members (often through religious organizations) recover from the psychological damage of violence. Interviews with Liberian women and data from elsewhere showed how deeply entangled “peace” movements are with social divisions, moral and political aspirations, and organizational dynamics. One of the lessons that I learned was that it was very difficult cleanly to separate civilians’ self-protection activities from “making peace.”

While women’s work for peace and their work for self-protection were entangled, the war affected the broader social and political landscape of Liberia. Several of the women with whom we spoke even claimed that the war had had a positive effect on women’s rights in Liberian society – in particular, 1) women were accorded more legal rights, 2) the average Liberian woman (though certainly not all women and more in urban areas) was more aware of her human rights, and 3) it was now socially possible for many of them to occupy higher-status positions (many of those my students and I interviewed had become leaders in non-governmental organizations) in a way that would not have been possible in, for example, the 1980s. One said:

Fortunately for us, as Liberian women, the war came. Though we were abused, our rights were violated during the war, it highlighted a lot of things and created awareness. So that’s why I say it’s fortunate, because it’s because of what happened that we began to speak out.

These were not women who saw the war in a rosy light – they had lived through extreme violence, and many of them had been personally subjected to wartime atrocities, particularly sexual violation. This undermined valuable norms like social trust, but the “silver lining” of the war was that it disrupted social relations so badly that it broke down many destructive social norms, like the subjugation of women.

The war seems to have allowed individual women to rise to the top in a period where norms that held them back were losing their force.

Female leaders with whom we spoke told us that they, personally, had always been more outspoken than their peers, but social norms had impeded them before the war’s disruption. One said she had “always been an outspoken person.” Another said, “all along, I wanted to be different.” The war seems to have allowed individual women to rise to the top in a period where norms that held them back were losing their force. Our interviews were consistent with research by Veronika Fuest on the Liberian women’s movement, which found divisions between an (often internationally) educated elite and the rank-and-file of the women’s movement. There was a perception the rhetoric of women’s rights retained “something of the city.”\textsuperscript{12}

The fact that organized social movements tend to generate elites does not, in itself, make them bad. The point is that these are individuals with connections and skills that put them outside settled social expectations and allow them to entertain views that are not universally held. A model of protection that ignores the fact that promoting, say, women’s rights is a move in a social conflict does not necessarily do women’s rights any favors. Liberians who oppose women’s rights have their reasons – they may not be good reasons, or they may be understandable reasons that manifest themselves in a distorted way. If we care about women’s rights, the goal should not be to ignore the conflict or to end it by putting international power on one side but to create ways in which the defenders of women’s rights and their opponents can meet in constructive ways.
Civilian-PKO Alliances

The women’s peace movement in Liberia was deeply linked to external actors and began to build strong international links early in the career of ECOMOG peacekeeping. When we asked what had contributed to women’s increased willingness and ability to engage in peace activism, especially during the second war, we received several variations on the response that women had become connected to broader peace networks and sources of information. One woman told us that the involvement of the Liberian Women’s Initiative (LWI) in the Abuja peace talks in 1994 brought in international assistance that had not previously been forthcoming, and that during the wars (between 1990 and 2003), “several Liberian women had the opportunity of having training on women’s rights, human rights and what have you.”

Civilians, especially those with previous international contacts and training, may be savvy about seeking out alliances with PKOs. One of our interview partners was a member of an important women’s peace group. When asked about her group’s relationship with ECOMOG, she said that her group provided ECOMOG with a lot of information about the conflict and the factions involved in it, and ECOMOG facilitated several of their meetings with warlords. Peacekeepers should expect organized locals to use the peacekeeping mission as part of their own strategy – one frequent characteristic of internationally linked advocates is that their strategies follow a “boomerang” pattern, where domestic obstacles are moved by going outside the country to enlist the aid of foreign or international agents.

With and without international assistance, the women’s groups in Liberia did tremendous work. But on the other hand, civilians who know how PKOs “tick” may also use that information strategically. And even groups not setting out cynically to manipulate peacekeepers will inevitably (and in many cases quite reasonably) use their connections with peacekeepers to press their view of how things should change. The point is not to undermine the credibility of civilians, but just to point out that as are too innocent to be able to make use of alliances with peacekeepers for their own ends is to deny them due respect.

The political nature of civilians’ own protection work potentially puts peacekeepers in a moral bind. It is futile to deny that their intervention makes them part of the social and value conflicts playing out in their area of operations. But they need to find a way to protect civilians that acknowledges the political nature of existing civilian activity without just picking a side (and simply to use their own moral judgment, enlightened and based in international norms as it may be, is to pick a side).

The way out of the bind is to embrace it – the particular contribution of peacekeepers can be to use their military force to provide safety for more non-violent interaction between factions at political and moral odds. This would be a sort of “protection-with,” instead of “protection-from,” oriented toward creating safe forms of interchange and contact between social groups rather than defining and protecting “safe zones” that are easier to control but may harden social divisions.

There are a large number of technical and moral details that need to be worked out to make such an approach feasible, most of which will be particular to the context. For example, fostering safe interaction in the urban crime/conflict zones of Haiti will look very different from encouraging interaction in displaced persons camps in Darfur. But the general approach is reinforced by the importance of affinity networks to protection strategies. By focusing their public safety efforts on bringing people together under a watchful eye precisely to pursue their political agendas, rather than by trying to provide safety first and to put off politics until later, peacekeepers can foster the creation of new affinity networks rather than tending to cut them off in the name of security.

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But even this leaves a question – what are different social groups or factions supposed to do with each other? If a PKO is in place, we already know that they have been unable to work out their differences peacefully. We already know that the factions do not agree, and that the balance of power favors the sort of hurting stalemate that leads to a peace agreement and deployment of a peacekeeping
force. I have just argued peacekeepers should not put their thumbs on the scale and change the balance of power and of interests. So what is the point or hope of peacekeeping?

**Threat, Negotiation, and Appeal**

I would like to suggest that new affinity networks and new possibilities for stable peace are created not by any rationalist process of negotiation over interests, but precisely through the lived experience of coming together as human beings. If peacekeepers can strip some of the fear and anger out of those encounters, they can help support the peace in a way that interpersonal protection may not accomplish as well.

Many of our conversations in Liberia made me feel quite stupid. We were interested in the ways Liberian women approached armed actors to make peace and provide for their own protection. Conversations often went something like this: we would ask how they managed to get armed actors to refrain from using violence. The person we were talking to would say that they talked to them. We would press, wanting to know how this was done. This would be met with a look and a tone usually reserved for annoying children, and a reiteration that they talked to them. “So we just keep insisting... It took a lot of constant contacts and constant banging to even be heard.”

Upon reflection, I realized that I found this answer mystifying only because I was in the grip of a particular kind of theory. According to this theory, armed actors have more or less fixed preferences. They advance their goals by abusing civilians and otherwise engaging in violence. This theoretical construct makes very little room for talking, except as a pure exchange of information on intentions and preferences.

What the Liberian women described to us, however, was a different kind of talking, one that relied on the possibility of changing the interlocutor’s views, not just informing him of the consequences. For the sake of clarity, let me use the term *negotiation* to refer to talking that centers on informing the interlocutor of one’s own interests and intentions, with the aim of finding an outcome that maximizes one’s own advantage. Then I can label conversation that seeks to change the way that the interlocutor sees things, possibly creating new interests or reshaping old ones, *appeal*.

For an example of appeal, consider the story told to me by a woman who had participated in a delegation to Guinea to seek the help of then-president Lansana Conté in bringing Charles Taylor to peace negotiations. She said:

We met Conté, we started talking to him, we told him why we were there, we told him what the women were suffering, what we were suffering, we could not sit back and let our country deteriorate, we told him people were dying and he had to do something... the eldest of all of us, she said Conté, look, President Conté, we are suffering, we are suffering! If you do not agree to talk, if you do not want to talk with Taylor, we will lock you and Taylor up in one room! We will keep the key! We will not give it back to you until you start talking, and then we will bring the two of you out. And President Conté was so carried away he said “Huh!” He started laughing, he said, “OK, look, let me tell you,” he said, “You are my mothers, you are my sisters.” He said, “You are come because of peace.” He said, “All of the organizations that have come speaking to us, the United Nations, the US, the OECD countries, they have their own interests. So I don’t entirely trust those people when they are talking about peace, peace, peace. But I trust you. You are the people I trust. Why? Because you are my mothers. You are my sisters. You know pain. You brought me into this world with pain.”

If we think of talking always in terms of negotiation, all peacekeepers bring to the table is the force to support their preferred side. But if we understand that appeal plays an important role in how civilians build safety for themselves, a more measured approach to force becomes attractive. Peacekeepers might have better success if force is de-emphasized and held in reserve to be used only as a means of making other interactions possible, rather than as a key part of the relation to armed groups.
The power of appeal is often felt in the most unexpected contexts. Consider, for example, the case of Joshua Milton Blahyi, better known in Liberia as the infamous “General Butt-Naked,” a leader in the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy, a faction feared for its presumptive magical powers. (A belief in magical protection encouraged Blahyi to go into battle naked, earning him his nom de guerre). Blahyi claimed to have received magical instruction from a spirit that prevented his tribe from having normal peaceful relations with other tribes. After causing a lot of mayhem, Blahyi converted to Christianity and renounced violence. He explained this by telling the story of how members of a local church came repeatedly to see him in Monrovia and to talk to him, at risk to their own lives. They came back no matter how many times he turned them away. Blahyi gives credit for his conversion and for the “defeat” of the spirit he previously worshiped to the power of Christ, a claim that is way beyond the scope of this discussion to assess – but his account is also consistent with a view that emphasizes the importance of personal contact to humanize even those with violent histories.

Conclusion

The role peacekeepers play is not simply to stop violence. Once peacekeepers arrive they are not fully outsiders. Every action a peacekeeping force takes becomes part of the evolving situation, participates in it, and changes it. In their planning and training, peacekeepers should take into moral account the ways in which their actions will alter an overall conflict in which – whatever their scruples of impartiality – the peacekeeping mission becomes a significant factor. If there is a coherent concept of impartiality to be found, it cannot be one that conceptually entails that peacekeepers remain above the fray. To stop or to prevent some violent incident is to protect civilians but it is also to intervene in the conflict. Peacekeepers may accomplish this without taking sides – but the goal should not and cannot be simply to separate the combatants from the civilians. Rather, the goal must be to bring the opposing factions together – this includes civilians -- and give them a secure context or space in which to talk.

Brian Urquhart, a former undersecretary of the UN, observed, “peacekeeping forces [have] no ‘enemies,’ just a series of difficult and sometimes homicidal clients.” Peacekeepers have no enemies. This is not just a terminological nicety, or a way of designating a now-defunct type of military operation born out of Cold War constraints and UN improvisation. Peacekeeping is a morally and strategically appropriate response to conflicts where parties have some sincere interest in a peace process, but are divided by mistrust, anger, fear, hatred, and temptation to advantage. The principle that peacekeepers have no enemies gives rise to an image of the central task of peacekeeping as that of creating spaces for affinity and appeal.

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Notes:

1With notable exclusions in Pfaff (2000); Blocq (2006); Tripodi (2006); Tronto (2008); Hill (2009).
2UN DPKO (2008), p.18.
4For important exceptions, see Bellamy and Williams (2009); Barrs (2010); Barrs (2012).
5Barrs (2010), pp.5-6.
6Ibid., p. 1.
7Ibid., p. 4.
8Ibid, p. 3.
9For an extensive and fascinating study of female members of armed groups, focused on Sierra Leone but with broader implications, see Coulter (2009).
10Mazurana (2004), p.27.
11For overviews of Liberian women’s action, see e.g. African Women and Peace Support Group (2004); Fuest (2008); Fuest (2009); and the 2008 documentary film Pray the Devil Back to Hell.
12Fuest (2009), pp.131–3.
Sources:


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