

***The Women in Blue Helmets:
Gender, Policing, and the UN's First All-
Female Peacekeeping Unit***

Lesley J. Pruitt
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Lesley Pruitt's book, *The Women in Blue Helmets*, provides an analysis of the first all-female formed police unit (FFPU) deployed by India to the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL). Pruitt, adopting a normative, critical-constructivist feminist approach, delivers an exhaustive account of the creation, work and implications of the unit at both individual and structural levels.

She explores how the FFPU came about, what some of the expectations surrounding it were and its broader implications for gender equality, peace and security. The book provides an in-depth examination of how the deployment of FFPU can work as a temporary measure to transform and challenge existing gender stereotypes in the security sector and increase female participation in peacekeeping operations and beyond. The key argument is that the FFPU is a timely innovation and non-permanent special measure that "pragmatically pursues long-term goals while working with short-term options" (p. 2). Women's participation in peace and security work—as one of the three original pillars in the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda—has been embraced by Pruitt as the main strategy for achieving a gendered transformation of institutions like the United Nations.

Her argument is that the deployment of the FFPU has had wide-ranging effects on local–global and individual–structural levels. She argues that "instead of expecting individual women to adapt themselves to the existing male-dominated system, FFPU provide the option of all-female spaces and pursue structural and procedural changes that give serious attention to women's needs and motivations" (p. 2). Pruitt notes that the FFPU has challenged gender dichotomies and stereotypes (p. 45) and, as such, has brought significant changes for women. The FFPU has encouraged local women to engage with the security sector—as evidenced, for example, by the greater numbers of women who joined the Liberian national police force after the deployment of the unit (p. 54). Reportedly, the deployment of the FFPU has also reduced the rate of sexual harassment and rape in Liberia,

thanks to the unit's enhanced responsiveness to sexual and gender-based crimes.

The FFPU has also engaged in community work since they were expected, as women, to "naturally" (p. 77) do extraordinary and multi-faceted work that would encourage local women to obtain good government jobs in the security sector. While obviously such effective work has been highly praised by women, Pruitt is concerned about this "second shift" (p. 72) that female peacekeepers are expected to do, while male peacekeepers are left off the hook. In her book, Pruitt exposes a tension between the assessment of women's performances and the rejection of instrumentalist discourses, which in fact perpetuate the gender inequality and gendered differences in access to security (p. 73). As argued, instrumentalist understandings are used to link women's presumed qualities with specific outcomes ('operational effectiveness') and, also, as a justification for the women's presence in these sites.

Pruitt argues that women should be included because they are political subjects with rights, not because of their 'operational effectiveness' or other instrumentalist justifications. Still, analysis of the FFPU effectiveness seems to be always discussed through the lens of the differences they (as women) may make in the hyper-militarised space of peacekeeping operations. It has been acknowledged that female peacekeepers make a positive difference, and the deployment of the FFPU shows that "the FFPU can create secure environments as effectively as men, and perhaps even more effectively" (p. 12). Pruitt very carefully tries not to fall into an instrumentalist discourse herself, while at the same time convincing readers that the women's presence increases the operational effectiveness of the mission through the extra benefits that women contribute to operations. Such efforts, however, may unconsciously play into the narrative that she is critical of. Pruitt persuasively argues that the FFPU's extraordinary results are due to a broader vision of their mandate and that FFPU's should be seen as a *temporary* and alternative special measure, and a "good and fair option" (p. 119) for women who are not ready to face the challenges associated with being integrated in mixed-gender units, but who still want to pursue a peacekeeping career.

The Women in Blue Helmets provides a refreshing and well-written analysis, building on feminist perspectives and scholarship in women's participation in peace and security work. The reader will be challenged with questions about the meaning of gender mainstreaming in the security sector: What kind of female participation is needed and desired? What should gender mainstreaming look like, and how is it implemented in practice? Do we need to add and stir, or segregate women into separate units in order to achieve gender equity in peacekeeping operations? What impacts do such female units have on the peacekeepers themselves and on local women? Pruitt's book is original, informative and gives a much-needed critique of the effects

of the policies translated into the field. The book does not pretend that it has all the answers to the questions I have raised; yet, it fills a significant gap in the current research on women and the peacekeeping/security sector. Enriched by empirical data, it is a page-turning read that I highly recommend for any feminist scholar.

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