

“Winning Hearts and Minds”? An Exploration of New Zealand Peacekeeping, Masculinities, and Identity in the Solomon Islands

- Kiri Stevens, 2013

Abstract

Close attention to the practices of masculinity, and individual negotiations of identity are often rendered invisible when exploring the implications of having soldiers engaged as peacekeepers in communities emerging from conflict. Using a feminist post-structural framework and qualitative interviews, I investigate whether involvement in peacekeeping is producing new gender and identity experiences for some New Zealand soldiers. Specifically, I explore the perceptions of two New Zealand Army Reserve Force soldiers who participated in the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands. Additionally, I engage with the reflections of seven Solomon Islanders to understand the impacts that these new understandings of gender and identity might have for conflict resolution and gender equality in local communities.

My research finds that the practices that soldiers value and consider most useful to be a successful soldier are changing as a result of their involvement in peacekeeping. New ideas about masculinity in the armed forces are being engendered by the need for soldiers to express a sense of equality and respect towards local people. The changing nature of soldiering is resulting in the emergence of practices that offer alternatives and/or challenge hegemonic and racialized militarized masculinities over those more traditionally valued in the armed forces. However, at the same time, some soldiers continue to place value on practices associated with hegemonic militarized masculinities, such as a belief in the continued need to carry weapons to create security.

I further suggest that Solomon Islanders interpreted participating soldiers' behaviours through broader historical-cultural narratives about different countries forces and their perceived cultural sensitivity. Therefore, soldiers' everyday resistances to racial narratives and militarized masculinities were important for creating a sense of trust and respect with local residents. However, while some Solomon Islanders welcomed the sense of security that soldiers produced, the carrying of weapons by soldiers undermined local conflict resolution practices.

By focussing on men and masculinities, my research contributes to discussions about hegemonic and militarized masculinities in peacekeeping, and challenges ideas that see men, masculinities and other aspects of identity as static or unconnected to historical and social practices.
