

Gender and Private Security

Maya Eichler

Western states are growing increasingly reliant on private military and security companies. Fully understanding the privatization of security and its effects on sustainable security requires the inclusion of a critical gender lens.

Introduction

In 1999, the American [private military contractor](#) Dyncorp hired Kathryn Bolkovac as UN International Police Task Force monitor in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In the course of her work Bolkovac raised allegations that private contractors and UN employees were trafficking and sexually exploiting young girls. In 2002, a UK court acknowledged that Bolkovac was wrongfully dismissed for bringing the story to light, but nobody was ever prosecuted for the alleged sex trafficking.

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Bolkovac's story – dramatized in the movie *The Whistleblower* – captures perfectly some of the challenges to accountability when security functions are outsourced to the private sector and performed by transnational security forces. Security privatization reduces transparency and accountability in ways that exacerbate and make less visible the gender inequalities and gender-based violence that pervade militarized security contexts. Moreover, security privatization increases the profitability of insecurities, making it more difficult to tackle the causes, including gendered causes, of insecurity. Understanding the privatization of security and its effects on sustainable security requires the inclusion of a [critical gender lens](#).

PMSCs and gender: an emerging challenge


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Over the past three decades a new challenge to sustainable security has emerged: the growing reliance on private military and security companies (PMSCs) by Western states, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and transnational corporations. PMSCs offer a wide range of services from logistical support, intelligence, training, armed and unarmed guarding and protection, to reconstruction and more. The US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have shown that today waging war is contingent on heavy involvement from the private sector. Private contractor numbers [have trailed and at times outpaced US troop levels](#) in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In February 2010, the US DoD employed more than [100,000 private contractors](#) each in Afghanistan and Iraq.

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A number of high-profile cases have highlighted the problems associated with the use of private contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan. Private contractors were involved in the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and the 2007 shooting and killing of Iraqi civilians in Nisour Square. Allegations of war crimes, poor working conditions, sexual harassment and human trafficking, and disregard for local populations have come to shape the public image of the private security industry over the past two decades.

In this context, gender has become part of the industry's attempts to improve its reputation. Gender considerations have made it into the voluntary [International Code of Conduct for Private Security Providers](#) that came into effect in November 2010. The International Code of Conduct explicitly addresses gender in three paragraphs on gender-based violence, selection of personnel, and harassment-free work environments. Gender has also been declared 'good for business' by the private security industry. Female employees of PMSCs are seen as useful to conduct security checks on women or to foster positive interactions with local populations, and thus seen as instrumental to operational effectiveness. This attention to gender, while positive on the surface, has mostly served the purpose of creating greater legitimacy for the industry. It has not addressed the larger impacts that outsourcing have on women's claims to greater and equal participation in the military sphere and the gendered impacts of the use of private forces in local contexts.

A critical gender lens on private security

Gender is not just a 'problem to be solved' for private contractors, but is fundamental to the reorganization of force through privatization, to the functioning of the private security industry, and to how the industry legitimizes

itself. The greater use of private force is part of the broader **neoliberal transformation of militarized citizenship** that has also entailed a shift from conscription to all-volunteer forces in many Western states. This reorganization of public force has meant an end to the male citizen-soldier model and the greater integration of women into all-volunteer forces. The greater reliance on private security has occurred alongside to the greater integration of women into Western public militaries. While **some decry** the feminization of public militaries, **others have shown** how PMSCs actively rely on hyper-masculinity in portraying themselves as more effective security forces vis-a-vis the public sector.

PMSCs that provide security services primarily recruit from the army and special forces. In doing so, they replicate and even reinforce the gendered division of labour present in the public military sphere. However, PMSCs have also made a **concerted effort to distance themselves** from the hyper-masculine images of trigger-happy burly ‘cowboys’ and shift towards a softer and more legitimate image of masculinity, shedding the hyper-masculine militarized image for one emphasizing humanitarianism, protection, professionalism, and expertise. At the same time, privatization sidelines and depoliticizes questions of gender equality in the military sphere. There is neither publicly available data on women in the private security industry nor public debate on their marginalization within the industry. By its very logic, profitability drives the private security sector and not questions of citizenship and equal participation.

Gender also intersects with race and citizenship to shape the division of labour in the **globally operating private security sector**. A large segment of the workers hired or subcontracted by PMSCs comes from the Global South. The globally operating private security industry can be thought of as a hierarchy of

masculinities. Western contractors are at the top of this hierarchy, and so-called third-country nationals (TCNs) from the Global South sit at the bottom. Profitability is in part achieved through the exploitation of this vulnerable migrant labour force.

The outsourcing of military security functions to private companies has allowed a [global rescaling of labour recruitment](#) in support of Western military operations. As [data from the US wars](#) in Iraq and Afghanistan show, a majority of contractor labour is made up by 'third-country' and host-country nationals and not by US citizens. For example, of the more than [200,000](#) DoD contractors working in Iraq and Afghanistan in February 2010 (mentioned above), less than [40,000](#) were US citizens. The racialized hierarchy among contractors of different citizenship is evident [not only in pay and working conditions](#), but also in the kind of work performed. While local and migrant workers perform much of the logistical support work, their proportion is particularly high when it comes to the more dangerous armed security work.

Conclusion

Simply bringing consideration of gender into the private security industry is not a sufficient enough means of addressing the problems that security privatization poses for sustainable security. Conflict is often justified and waged by appealing to gendered notions of security: masculinized protectors and defenders, and feminized and vulnerable populations in need of protection. Private actors feed into this gendered discourse, portray themselves as masculinized protectors, and benefit from continuing insecurities and global inequalities. As insecurities create new market opportunities for the private security industry, gendered discourses of protection and gendered divisions of labour are being reinforced while sustainable security becomes more elusive.

We need to be mindful of security privatization *and* the fundamental ways in which it is gendered as we work towards remaking security in more sustainable ways.

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