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Challenges facing personnel with caring responsibilities in security sector institutions and UN peace operations

Policy Brief

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This Policy Brief draws from the findings of the research project *Advancing the Meaningful Participation of Women in UN Peace Operations by Supporting Personnel with Caring Responsibilities*, funded by the Global Affairs Canada (GAC) as part of the Elsie Initiative for Women in Peace Operations (2023-2026).ⁱ

This brief builds from the perspectives and experiences of the 553 research participants who contributed to this project (257 interviewees and 296 survey respondents), representing 63 countries, and comprising uniformed personnel (police and military), civilians, and civil society representatives. It identifies key challenges raised by personnel with caring responsibilities and provides key recommendations on how to address them.

Caring Responsibilities and Unpaid Care Work

Recognising that the terms “caring responsibilities” and “unpaid care work” are not universally used or understood, for the purpose of this Report, caring responsibilities refers to the essential, usually unpaid, activities that care-givers undertake for others, and themselves, in response to a specific need. These responsibilities typically involve caring for children and other family members, including family members who are ill, disabled or elderly. Activities can include cooking, housework and providing physical and personal care for someone, such as helping someone get dressed, bathe or eat. The term care work – or unpaid care work – is often used to refer to these activities and gives credence to the argument that care work is labour rather than simply “help”.

Uniformed personnel face many challenges when balancing caring responsibilities alongside demanding and unpredictable work in security sector institutions (SSIs). Oftentimes these challenges are shaped by gender norms which commonly position women as caregivers, increasing barriers to women’s participation and retention in the sector by constraining

women's availability and flexibility. Many of these challenges are not experienced exclusively by women, with many men in the sector reporting similar difficulties balancing caring and professional responsibilities. The widespread challenges and impacts of managing caring responsibilities alongside security work point to a broader workplace culture which devalues care as an external and personal issue, placing additional strains on personnel with caring responsibilities.

This brief demonstrates that caring responsibilities are not solely a private or individual concern, but an institutional matter that directly affects participation, retention, well-being, and operational effectiveness.

[Intersecting challenges of managing care and security work](#)

Interview and survey participants highlight the intersecting challenges they often face when managing their caring responsibilities alongside demanding and unpredictable security work, including:

- Practical challenges: such as lack of adequate childcare, infrastructure, and facilities that limit personnel's availability and flexibility.
- Organisational challenges: particularly rigid and inflexible work arrangements, deployment periods, and institutional biases that devalue care or overlook the impacts of an individual's caring responsibilities on their performance.
- Personal challenges: including stress and anxiety from long periods of family separation and the subsequent strains on their relationships as a result of their absence.

These challenges, however, frequently overlap and reinforce one another. For instance, personal challenges are often compounded by, or emerge as a result of, practical and organisational challenges.

Many of these challenges are also due to rigid gender norms that position women as caregivers and men as more suitable for security work. These gender norms contribute to a range of practical, organisational, and personal challenges for personnel with caring responsibilities. For instance, SSIs sustain a work culture that expects availability of staff at short notice, requires long and unpredictable working hours, and rewards those who are able to work late and meet demanding workloads. This often means that for many, arranging

childcare and support that fits within irregular working hours is a challenge and, due to the gendered nature of unpaid care work, this drives women's attrition in the sector.

Although the UN and national SSIs have implemented a number of policies, guidelines, and practices to increase women's representation and participation in security and peacekeeping work, women remain underrepresented and continue to have higher attrition rates in the sector in comparison to men.

By addressing the intersecting challenges of balancing care and security work, military and police organisations, as well as the UN, can address key barriers for women's participation in the sector and improve operational effectiveness by mitigating key stressors among uniformed personnel.

Practical challenges

Adequate and affordable care

A key challenge for many personnel includes a lack of adequate, affordable, and logistically feasible childcare. The challenges of securing adequate childcare are exacerbated by the expectations of long and irregular hours of security work. In addition, many who are required to relocate with their family also face having to organise new childcare arrangements each time they move. These concerns are also shared by personnel who provide care for elderly parents or unwell family members, for instance, and must similarly secure and manage care arrangements alongside their work schedule.

...the schedules, you know, sometimes, like a 12-hour workday...[which is] difficult for people with caring responsibilities. When the daycare closes at 5pm for instance, and yeah, the lack of childcare overall...[and the problems around] its availability and its suitability for folks who work in security organisations who have a lot of unpredictability (Interview #109).

For many caregivers, the challenges of finding affordable and flexible care arrangements can mean relying on other support networks such as family members or spouses, particularly when they are deployed and unable to physically attend to their caring responsibilities. While

for those who do not have partners or nearby family members to rely on, it can incur significant financial costs to ensure they meet their care and work obligations.

Why is it 8:30 until 3 o'clock? How does that possibly fit into the modern expectations of a workday? ...In terms of how people work in the...security sector, particularly if they're working like shift work... [And] if you're in a traditional family unit where you have 2 parents and children, then, of course...the spillover impact of having one parent who is then away, it means that that other parent then bears an even greater responsibility at the time for that period... (Interview #108).

Deployment: Challenges of mission remoteness, facilities, and communication

For personnel with caring responsibilities, deployment notices and duration can be challenging. Firstly, the short notice often given (particularly during an emergency or crisis) requires sudden care arrangements to be made. While the length of deployments often varies between T/PCCs, personnel are often required to deploy for 12 months or longer to UN peace operations. These factors are costly for many caregivers, particularly for single parents or primary carers, and requires additional support either through care facilities or through support networks such as spouses or other family members. As a result, many caregivers choose not to - or are unable to - deploy, meaning they miss out on career opportunities.

To address some of the barriers caregivers face when deploying, some countries have introduced shorter deployment periods, though this poses different challenges. For instance, there are additional costs involved when training and deploying additional peacekeepers, while shorter deployments mean many personnel feel separated from their teams who deploy for longer. Although the UN's Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy 2018-2028 recommends 6-month deployments for personnel with children under the age of 7, "uptake is low" (Interview #80) and deployment periods remain longer.

Maternal bias shapes deployment, with many uniformed women with caring responsibilities not being told about opportunities to deploy or not being put forward to deploy because of assumptions that they do not want to – or should not – deploy. Some women with young children may only be deployed for 6-months based on the assumption that they will not wish or are unavailable to deploy for longer periods, despite many preferring 12-month durations.

Deployment to remote and insecure mission environments creates additional practical and psychological challenges for personnel with caring responsibilities as the ability to regularly communicate with families at home is often limited. Geographic isolation and poor infrastructure mean that communication technologies are often unreliable, unstable, and limited.

Lack of good living conditions, remote locations and deficient communication channels and long deployment periods do not facilitate the recruitment and retention of civilian and security personnel with caring responsibilities in peacekeeping operations (survey respondent).

Long deployments in remote and insecure locations and prolonged separation from families contribute significantly to stress and reduced wellbeing. This also places additional strains on relationships with their partners or support networks and with those they care for.

And depending on where I am...sometimes we seem to be having a good day. I don't want to jinx it - our internet's working alright. But the means to communicate back home...can be pretty poor... I just got some parcels last night that were sent [four months ago]... my daughter had done some drawings. She wants to know, 'hey, did you like my painting dad?' 'Sorry, I haven't seen it yet, sweetie.' So yeah, just that, that remove from the people that you're normally caring for (Interview #151).

Organisational challenges

Human resource policies: Flexible working arrangements and leave

Inadequate human resource policies also constrain the participation of caregivers in the security sector. Limited access to flexible working arrangements – even where policies may exist – creates challenges for many caregivers. While such arrangements may not always be feasible on peace operations, there are many desk-based roles within SSIs where more flexible schedules and hours could be accommodated. However, flexible working arrangements continue to be viewed by some personnel as a hindrance to productivity, deterring many from accessing these policies.

...it seems to be like all the jobs that you apply for, including UN ones that I've looked at in the past, there haven't really got flexible working hours, like I think a lot of the fields are still very male dominated. And so if you went into those jobs and started to negotiate your hours, I think that you'd probably not really be competitive for a lot of the roles, which is a shame, because the amount of women in the security sector is increasing, but I don't, I don't feel that the flexibility is increasing... (Interview #114).

Inadequate leave policies (maternal, paternal, parental, carer's or compassionate leave) and a lack of communication or knowledge among leadership also make it difficult for caregivers to navigate and access support available to them.

Leadership

The implementation of policies often relies on the support and discretion of leadership. As a result, there is inconsistent access to policies which support caregivers. Where leadership is attentive to the needs of caregivers, personnel have greater awareness and access to support policies to enable a work-life balance. While a lack of support or knowledge of policies among leadership creates an additional challenge for many caregivers in the sector.

Our policies, our practices, our structures are set by senior leaders in accordance with what they think is the best decision-making on the day...And if that senior leader does not have an awareness, is not alert to, is not exposed to, inoculated to the issues of caring, or does not really take them seriously, because they have not affected them. Or if it's not been apparent in their particular career, then they will not step up for the policy that may perhaps cost a little more but allows for a change in behaviour...One doesn't have to be deliberately negligent, one can simply be naive to an issue, because you haven't lived it yourself (Interview #125).

Personal challenges

Family separation

One of the most significant stressors for personnel, particularly while deployed to UN peace operations, is family separation. Caring responsibilities do not stop during deployment and many personnel must continue to manage their care obligations remotely while balancing the

demands of deployment. As such, caring responsibilities often remain “at the forefront” of personnels’ minds during deployment (Interview #131). This challenge is prevalent among uniformed women, many of whom are expected to perform and oversee care duties remotely during deployment, including maintaining daily routines for their children, organising care and schedules, managing doctors’ appointments or medication (particularly for those caring for elderly family members).

Stress, anxiety, guilt

Long periods of family separation negatively impact the mental health and well-being of personnel, frequently leading to feelings of stress, guilt, and anxiety. These challenges are exacerbated by the stressful and high-pressure environment of peace operations. This can impact performance and lead to personnel feeling they are “pulled in too many directions” (Interview #123). The compounding personal and practical challenges while deployed leave many experiencing a “double guilt”: guilt associated with being absent from their families, alongside guilt arising from distraction or reduced focus at work. Additional stress also can arise when caregivers worry about their children should they be killed or injured.

That emotional guilt starts to kick in as well. Have I done the right thing, you know, on tour, have that the right thing being in the army, am I doing the right thing staying in the army. You get this whole guilt trip going on (Interview #143).

Relationship strains

Deployment and the long working hours typical in the security sector strains personal relations. Being absent for long periods places additional pressures on family members who must fulfil additional care duties, with some partners feeling isolated and children becoming distant:

...you cannot have [your family here], and I think the disadvantage of that is...these children, you know, grow up without one parent who is always in the field... And, you know, sometimes it also happened eventually when the staff member...[retires and finds they are] estranged from...the family and from the children. And I think that’s kind of the main disadvantage...when you have a family, because you miss that important time with your family, which nobody can, you know, bring back or pay for or, you know, just missed it (Interview #171).

...since 2019 either I'm on course outside, personal course and military course, military school. So, [my daughter] she doesn't want to see me. She says, I don't have time for her. So that's one of the challenges. When...she wants something, she will call another, but she will tell you that daddy doesn't have time for me. It's not, it's not my fault (Interview #76).

This is often pronounced when personnel return home and find that their families tried “to adapt themselves to your absence” (Interview #56) and “have learned how to live without you” (Interview #39). Some find the readjustment period difficult, particularly where they return to broken relationships or find that their friendships have frayed in their absence, impacting access to support networks and negatively impacting their mental health and well-being in an already challenging transition period.

Recommendations

The overlapping nature of the personal, practical, and organisational challenges faced by personnel with caring responsibilities within SSIs and UN peace operations mean they require systemic and institutional changes to address them and support the participation of caregivers in the sector.

Provide increased support for care

- Review existing policies in military and police organisations as well as the UN to ensure that personnel with caring responsibilities are supported and their diverse needs accommodated.
- Consult personnel with caring responsibilities throughout policy and decision-making processes to meaningfully identify and address challenges and policy gaps.
- Increase attention and investment in supporting personnel with caring responsibilities, such as ensuring access to care facilities that accommodate long working hours and reduce stress, particularly when having to relocate on short notice and find new care arrangements.
- Improve leave policies to ensure personnel are not penalised for taking time off to attend to caring responsibilities. This can include enhancing carer's leave to support those who require unexpected time off, particularly when a family member is unwell, without using their own sick leave. While making leave more accessible more broadly, for instance, by improving parental leave to allow more men to take leave

and for personnel with “...diverse family structures, including adoption and same-sex parents” (survey respondent).

- Raise awareness among leadership of what leave is available for personnel and encouraging greater uptake of parental and paternity leave (promoting shared care work and reducing stigma in the workplace).
- Ensure that men and people of diverse gender identities are included in care policies to promote greater gender equality in the armed forces, and ensure all employees are supported.

Allow more flexible working arrangements for personnel with caring responsibilities

- Improve human resource policies to better support flexible working arrangements, including greater access to job-sharing roles, remote or part-time work, and flexible working hours where possible, particularly those located in an office (such as headquarters).
- Consider making policies on flexible working arrangements to be available for staff who meet certain criteria to improve consistency of implementation.
- Expand flexible working arrangements where possible to support greater work-life balance and further support women’s retention in the sector.

Provide more support for carers while they are deployed

- Recognise that caring responsibilities do not stop during deployment and ensure policies are attentive to the needs and caring responsibilities of personnel.
- Expand pre-deployment support for personnel to navigate and manage their time away and adjust to the work environment of UN peace operations.
- Ensure access to stable and reliable wi-fi for personnel to remain in contact with their families. Further, providing dedicated time each day for personnel to speak with their families and private spaces to make calls will contribute to personnel well-being and performance in the mission.
- Extend support to family members of deployed personnel to mitigate stress of family separation on both personnel and their families, including psychological support and establishing and connecting family members to informal support networks.
- Consider implementing measures to help personnel fulfil their caring responsibilities while they are deployed, including childcare or education allowances to support

children with their school, and “healthcare or [social] workers” to visit elderly family members (Interview #117; Interview #46).

The private life has a big impact on the wellbeing, even if you are on a mission, your private life is not on a pause. So, if your private life is well functioning, you will have better opportunities to contribute to the work you are doing in the mission (survey respondent).

Strengthen leadership accountability and policy implementation

- Improve the consistent interpretation and implementation of policies among leadership by ensuring clear and coherent guidelines are in place, this will enhance access to policies and accountability among leaders.
- Provide more training and awareness raising among leadership on what policies are available, managing different needs and work schedules of personnel, and the impacts of caring responsibilities on career progression and opportunities.
- Increase knowledge and awareness of what policies are available among personnel to avoid relying solely on sympathetic and informed supervisors.
- Consider implementing a carer’s passports to improve consistency across the organisation by including a description of a personnel’s caring responsibilities and their needs to their file. This details any flexible working arrangements or other agreements negotiated between the service member and their supervisor (for instance, their ability to travel, availability for short-notice callouts, and so on) and avoid the need for renegotiation of any arrangements between personnel and supervisors when entering a new role.

When organisations recognise and support their personnel with caring responsibilities it not only benefits individual personnel but also organisational and operational effectiveness, including by positively impacting work cultures and personnel well-being and performance and by helping to retain talent, reduce attrition, diversify the workforce and increase the meaningful participation of women.

ⁱ Global Affairs Canada (2026) *Elsie Initiative for Women in Peace Operations*. Government of Canada website. https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_developpement-enjeux_developpement/gender_equality-egalite_des_genres/elsie_initiative-initiative_elsie.aspx?lang=eng.