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Beyond Women-Only Lenses: The Unseen Gender Bias in Peacekeeping Operations

Policy Brief

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Monash Global Peace and Security (Monash GPS), with funding support from Global Affairs Canada as part of the Elsie Initiative for Women in Peace Operations,¹ undertook research '*Advancing the Meaningful Participation of Women in UN Peace Operations by Supporting Personnel with Caring Responsibilities*' (2023-26). The research sought to identify the causes and consequences of the marginalisation of women with caring responsibilities within military and police organisations in troop- and police-contributing countries (T/PCCs) and in United Nations (UN) peace operations. Findings from field research in three UN peace operations inform this policy brief: the UN Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS), the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), and the UN Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). Findings are also informed by interviews and a global survey with peacekeepers and other uniformed personnel, as well as civilians engaged in or impacted by peace operations. There are 553 research participants (257 interviewees and 296 survey respondents), representing 63 countries. Where gender and roles are known, 65% of research participants are women (35% men) and 84% are uniformed personnel (armed forces and police).

The policy brief examines the caring responsibilities of personnel in UN peacekeeping operations through a gender mainstreaming lens. It outlines policy recommendations for T/PCCs and the UN to ensure that mainstreaming does not reinforce harmful norms of

¹ 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.

masculinity, undermine institutional well-being, or limit the outcomes of gender mainstreaming reforms.

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 Policy Brief, caring responsibilities refer to the essential, usually unpaid, activities that caregivers 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”.

Introduction

Efforts to mainstream gender within the peace and security framework have been vital in promoting women’s participation, protection, and visibility in peacekeeping operations. Over the past twenty years, gender mainstreaming has brought attention to structural inequalities that historically excluded women from security institutions and decision-making roles.² Consequently, the UN has adopted policy frameworks and institutional reforms to support women’s inclusion and leadership within peace operations.³ However, the implementation of these efforts has also created an unintended imbalance.⁴ In practice, the UN’s policies and frameworks have often regarded uniformed women as gendered subjects whose specific needs must be recognised and accommodated, especially in peace operations.⁵ At the same time, T/PCCs implicitly assume that uniformed men are resilient, unencumbered, and always

² True J and Parisi L (2013) ‘Gender Mainstreaming Strategies in International Governance’ In Caglar G, Prügl E, and Zwingel S (eds) *Feminist Strategies in International Governance*, Routledge Global Institutions Series, Routledge.

³ United Nations (2026) *Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security*. United Nations website. <https://peacemaker.un.org/en/thematic-areas/women-peace-security/normative-frameworks/security-council-resolutions>

⁴ Bastick M (2018) ‘Gender and Security Sector Reform’ In Gentry CE, Shepherd LJ, and Sjoberg L (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Security*, Routledge, London; Salahub J, and Nerland K (2010) ‘Just Add Gender? Challenges to Meaningful Integration of SSR Policy and Practice’ In Mark Sedra (ed) *The Future of SSR*, Centre for International Governance Innovation.

⁵ George N, Lee-Koo K, and Shepherd LJ (2018) ‘Gender and the Un’s Women, Peace and Security Agenda’ In Gentry CE, Shepherd LJ, and Sjoberg L (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Security*, Routledge, London

available for deployment.⁶ These assumptions by the UN and T/PCCs have influenced operational policies and workplace cultures in ways that hide the diverse realities of personnel serving in peacekeeping missions.⁷

When gender mainstreaming becomes procedural, focused primarily on increasing women's participation or creating women-specific initiatives, it can inadvertently reinforce narrow gender norms.⁸ Men's experiences and vulnerabilities, including their roles as caregivers, may remain invisible within institutional policy frameworks. This invisibility not only perpetuates restrictive expectations of masculinity but can also undermine personnel well-being and institutional effectiveness.

Drawing on field visits to UN peace operations, this policy brief examines how the exclusion of men's experiences and vulnerabilities from gender mainstreaming frameworks creates an imbalance that manifests in everyday institutional practices. While these frameworks have been essential in addressing the historical exclusion of women, gaps in their implementation persist. The brief does not challenge the importance or legitimacy of gender mainstreaming; rather, it argues for its recalibration within peacekeeping operations. By recognising that care, vulnerability, and work–life responsibilities affect personnel across genders, peace operations can move toward a more inclusive and human-centred understanding of security-sector participation. The analysis focuses specifically on how the caregiving responsibilities of male uniformed personnel are represented and accommodated within mission environments. It finds that their relative invisibility reinforces the perception of caregiving as primarily a woman's responsibility, thereby sustaining structural barriers to women's meaningful participation. The brief concludes with recommendations to ensure gender mainstreaming better reflects the lived realities of all personnel.

⁶ Eichler M (2018) 'Gendered Militarism' In Gentry CE, Shepherd LJ, and Sjoberg L (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Security*, Routledge, London; Karim, S (2018) 'Gender and Peacekeeping' In Gentry CE, Shepherd LJ, and Sjoberg L (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Security*, Routledge, London

⁷ It should be noted that while the UN encourages T/PCCs (Member States) to be gender sensitive in its planning, design and deployment of personnel, each State has operationalised the gender agenda differently.

⁸ Heikkinen A, Lammela J, Lietzen L, Lähti J, and Karhulahti E (2012) 'Gender Mainstreaming: Inclusion or Exclusion'. In Stolz S Philipp Gonon P (eds) *Challenges and Reforms in Vocational Education: Aspects of Inclusion and Exclusion, Studies in Vocational and Continuing Education*. Peter Lang AG, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften; Joachim J, Andrea Schneiker A (2012) 'Changing Discourses, Changing Practices? Gender Mainstreaming and Security' *Comparative European Politics*, 10, no. 5, 528–63, <https://doi.org/10.1057/cep.2011.35>; Johansson T and Klinth R (2008) 'Caring Fathers: The Ideology of Gender Equality and Masculine Positions'. *Men and Masculinities*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X06291899>.

Why Gender Mainstreaming?

In 1995, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action marked a significant shift in global policy on gender equality. It highlighted gender mainstreaming as an approach to systematically incorporating gender perspectives into policies and programmes across all sectors, including peace and security. This policy direction gained momentum with the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325. The resolution highlighted the limited representation of women within peacekeeping operations and emphasised the need to increase women's participation at all levels of decision-making in peace and security processes. Subsequent resolutions 1889, 2242, and 2538 reinforced this commitment by encouraging greater representation of women in military and police contingents.

Alongside these resolutions, initiatives such as the Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy (2018–2028) set measurable targets to increase the number of women deployed in peacekeeping operations. These efforts were necessary responses to the longstanding underrepresentation of women in security institutions and the structural barriers that limited their participation. In response to the call for increased women's participation in peacekeeping operations, institutions developed frameworks to integrate gender perspectives. Consequently, gender mainstreaming is the process of embedding gender analysis⁹ at every stage of the development and implementation of policies, programmes and practices.

Therefore, through its gender mainstreaming initiatives, the UN aimed to tackle institutional, social, legal, and cultural norms that limited women's participation in peace operations. In practice, this often resulted in initiatives specifically designed to support women's deployment and retention.¹⁰ While these initiatives are vital for addressing the historical underrepresentation of women in peace operations, their implementation occasionally places women as the main or sole focus of gender policies.

⁹ Gender Analysis, in summary, is the systematic process of examining how differences in gender roles, activities, needs, opportunities, and rights/entitlements affect men, women, girls, and boys in specific situations or contexts. It explores the relationships between genders and their access to and control of power and resources.

¹⁰ Wittwer J (2024) Gender Mainstreaming in United Nations Peace Operations: An Unfulfilled Promise? Special Report. Australian Strategic Policy Institute, https://ad-aspi.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/2024-08/Gender%20mainstreaming%20in%20UN%20peace%20keeping%20operations.pdf?VersionId=7Riy3_3PtW.nmKZf_icyJe4BSLKg3MU4.

While gender mainstreaming was essential to address the historical marginalisation of women in the security sector and their deployment into peacekeeping operations, its implementation inadvertently created a policy blind spot. It limited the recognition of men's gendered experiences, including their caring responsibilities and well-being, within the force and peace operations. The assumption that uniformed men are universally available and free of caregiving responsibilities led the UN and T/PCCs' gender mainstreaming initiatives to focus on increasing the number of women through the establishment of women-centred programmes.¹¹

Men and Caring Responsibilities

Gender norms have historically cast women as primary carers, while security institutions have traditionally portrayed men as ideal soldiers, always available, resilient, and free from family duties. One peacekeeper explains, "I think there is a cultural bias in the UN system, an organisational cultural bias to conceive of the issue of caring for children to be an issue that relates to women and not to men."

These assumptions extend across the security sector – particularly defence, where operational culture often prioritises constant readiness and deployability. When deployed, there is often little consideration of family separation as a significant stressor, and sometimes inadequate internet access that prevents peacekeepers from keeping in touch with families.¹² As a result, caring responsibilities, particularly those held by men, remain largely invisible within institutional policies and everyday practices and remain largely unsupported. This greatly affects men, whose children "grow up without one parent who is always in the field," according to a UNMISS peacekeeper. It further disrupts communication between fathers and children; as one peacekeeper in MONUSCO explained, "they don't want to speak to me anymore." However, for men, there is often a stigma around discussing caring responsibilities and well-being, and as such, they contend with their financial care responsibilities.

Security institutions operate within organisational cultures that value endurance, sacrifice, and continuous availability.¹³ Peacekeeping duties often require long hours, demanding training

¹¹ Mobekk E (2010) 'Gender, Women and Security Sector Reform' *International Peacekeeping* 17, no. 2, 278–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533311003625142>.

¹² Lowe L (2026) 'The Overlooked Challenge of Peacekeeping: Family Separation' *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, 2026. <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-overlooked-challenge-of-peacekeeping-family-separation/>.

¹³ Howard JW and Prividera LC (2006) 'Gendered Nationalism: A Critical Analysis of Militarism, Patriarchy, and the Ideal Soldier' *Texas Speech Communication Journal*, 30, no. 2, 134–45.

regimes, and extended deployments away from home. In this context, the “ideal” soldier or peacekeeper is expected to be permanently mission-ready. Periods of unavailability, such as maternity, paternity, parental, or carers leave, can be seen as limiting operational efficiency or disrupting unit cohesion. This, in turn, hampers career prospects and, as a result, reinforces the ideal-type soldier with the seemingly unencumbered and perpetually available, more likely to rise to leadership levels.

While maternity leave is broadly recognised as a biological necessity, it still complicates the concept of the ideal soldier and has traditionally influenced perceptions that women are less suitable for deployment. Conversely, men are frequently assumed to be biologically and socially ready for deployment at any time. This belief reinforces institutionalised notions of masculinity that associate professional competence with emotional resilience, physical stamina, and a lack of caregiving responsibilities.¹⁴ A male military officer shared that during pre-deployment interviews, some mothers are questioned,

‘Won’t you miss your children?’ Or ‘how are your children going to respond?’...which they might not necessarily be asking of a man who is a father.”

Such questioning can be a stressor for women preparing to deploy and may prompt the creation of support services for female peacekeepers. However, the lack of acknowledgement of men’s care responsibilities results in the absence of support structures for male peacekeepers.

Several peacekeepers interviewed during the field research described this dynamic as a “cultural bias” or “cultural lag” within security institutions. Parental leave policies may formally exist, but organisational culture often frames caregiving as a maternal responsibility rather than a shared one. As a result, men may be reluctant to access parental or carer leave for fear that doing so will signal reduced commitment or operational unreliability. A British officer reflected on the expectation to prioritise duty above all else, noting that repeated deployments often required placing professional obligations before family life:

There’s been so many deployments, and I’ve always had to put my job first. And I think it impacted my family more than it did my career...If I was activated for ops, then there

¹⁴ Karim S, Beardsley K, Olsson L, and Gizelis TL (2015) ‘Ladies Last: Peacekeeping and Gendered Protection 1’. In *Gender, Peace and Security: Implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325*. Routledge, London.

wasn't a way in which I could say no, unless it went through an official J-1¹⁵ chain and there had to be a real good reason why I couldn't deploy.

Such perception shapes deployment decisions and everyday attitudes within mission environments. In the mission areas, men are assumed to absorb risk, trauma and discomfort, as an engineer in MINUSCA discussing the state of accommodation in remote areas exclaimed,

How can I bring more women here? Where do I put them? Therefore, it is easier to deploy men. There is no stress about accommodation.

Women may be viewed primarily through the lens of motherhood, while men are assumed to be more suitable for deployment because they are perceived as having fewer domestic obligations. A peacekeeper in UNMISS captured this tension succinctly:

Yes, women are still seen as mothers first and foremost... You know, I've never heard in all my years anyone saying 'he's a father. I'm not going to put him forward, because he might be killed.

However, evidence from field research challenges these assumptions. In the global survey, 29 per cent of respondents were men, and 81 per cent of them reported having caregiving responsibilities. Interviews further revealed that many male peacekeepers support their families in various ways, including providing financial support, emotional care, and making decisions about household welfare. Several also spoke about being primary and sometimes sole caregivers. However, these responsibilities are often described by the men themselves in ways that align with dominant gender expectations, emphasising financial provision over caregiving roles.

The institutional neglect of men's caregiving realities has wider implications. When men's vulnerabilities and family responsibilities are not recognised, it reinforces the ideal soldier cultures, which reinforce masculine sacrifice and emotional detachment. Over time, these dynamics can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder, burnout, decreased morale, and reduced operational effectiveness. Furthermore, when gender policies focus solely on women's needs without recognising the wider gendered experiences of all staff, they can cause resentment or backlash, ultimately weakening the goals of gender mainstreaming itself. Therefore, it is crucial

¹⁵ In the British military, J1 refers to the staff branch responsible for Personnel and Manpower

not only for the well-being of the wider staff but also for enhancing the credibility and durability of gender reforms within peacekeeping operations.

Recommendations

The brief indicates that several Member States and the UN have begun to rethink how gender mainstreaming is implemented within security institutions and mission environments. To address the blind spots identified in this brief, particularly the invisibility of men's caregiving responsibilities and well-being, gender mainstreaming must evolve beyond a narrow focus on women's representation. Instead, it should adopt a more inclusive and human-centred approach that recognises the gendered realities affecting all personnel serving in peacekeeping operations.

1. Adopt a transformative approach to gender mainstreaming.

Gender mainstreaming strategies should move beyond equating "gender" with women alone. A transformative approach should simultaneously challenge patriarchal exclusion of women and the patriarchal expectations placed on men, particularly the expectation that men must be perpetually available, resilient, and detached from caregiving responsibilities. Policies should therefore explicitly recognise diverse care responsibilities of personnel within peacekeeping institutions, as gender norms shape experiences, vulnerabilities, and responsibilities.

2. Normalise caregiving responsibilities across genders

Institutional policies should actively promote the recognition and use of parental and carers' leave by all staff, especially men. Normalising paternal leave and caregiving roles can reduce stigma and help change organisational culture away from the idea that caregiving is only a woman's responsibility. This can benefit women's careers and men's well-being. Clear guidance, leadership support, and open communication are vital to ensure staff can access these policies without fear of professional consequences.

3. Integrate well-being and work–life balance into gender policy frameworks.

Gender policies should integrate a systematic focus on the well-being of peacekeeping personnel, including addressing mental health, trauma exposure, and the stress caused by prolonged separation from families. This is central to organisational duty of care as well as a strategic imperative, acknowledging the relationship between well-being, performance and outcomes. Gathering gender-disaggregated data on personnel needs, not just representation,

can help organisations better understand how caregiving responsibilities, stress, and deployment patterns (e.g. frequency and duration of deployments, and time between deployments) impact both men and women. This evidence can guide the development of more responsive and supportive personnel policies as well as more comprehensive mental health and psychological support.

4. Strengthen leadership training on inclusive gender analysis

Senior leadership and mission management require ongoing training to broaden understanding of gender beyond women-focused initiatives. Leaders play a vital role in shaping organisational culture and in implementing policy. Training should enable them to recognise gendered assumptions in deployment practices, welfare policies, and institutional expectations, ensuring that gender mainstreaming reflects the realities of the entire workforce.

Gender mainstreaming in peacekeeping is not a zero-sum exercise. Efforts to advance gender equality are weakened, not strengthened, when the gendered experiences and vulnerabilities of men remain unacknowledged. Addressing these blind spots can enhance institutional legitimacy, personnel well-being, operational effectiveness, and the credibility of gender reforms. Encouraging examples already exist. Within the Ghana Armed Forces, for instance, Gender Focal Persons include both male and female officers, signalling that gender responsibility is shared across the institution. Similarly, at the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus, welfare initiatives such as mission recreation centres allow deployed personnel to maintain meaningful connections with their families, including interacting virtually with children during deployments.

Such initiatives demonstrate that more inclusive approaches to gender mainstreaming are both practical and achievable. By recognising caregiving, vulnerability, and well-being as shared human realities rather than gendered exceptions, security institutions can strengthen both their personnel policies and their commitment to equitable participation in global peace operations.