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Caring Responsibilities as a Key Driver of Women's Marginalisation in the Security Sector

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 Research draws from 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).

Interviews were conducted online and across seven country sites: 3 x Troop and Police Contributing Countries (T/PCCs - United Kingdom, India and Indonesia); 3 x UN peace operations – UN Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS), UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) and UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO); UN HQ (New York).

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”.

Caring responsibilities — principally for children but also for elderly or unwell family members — constitute one of the most significant yet under-addressed barriers to women's meaningful participation in the armed forces, police, and UN peace operations. This policy brief sets out how the highly gendered nature of unpaid care work creates cascading disadvantages for women across recruitment, retention, training, deployment, and career progression. These impacts don't just harm individual personnel; there are significant and direct consequences for organisational readiness, performance and capability as well as mission outcomes.

The Problem: Caring Responsibilities as a Structural Barrier

Caring responsibilities impact every stage of a security career — from entering the sector through to reaching leadership positions. Because unpaid care work remains overwhelmingly performed by women, and because women are socially expected to assume the role of primary caregiver, the effects are profoundly gendered.ⁱⁱ These impacts principally arise from three intersecting drivers:

- **Practical barriers** — caring responsibilities constrain time, flexibility, and the ability to travel or relocate, all of which are fundamental requirements in military and police careers.
- **Limited institutional support** — organisational policies, leadership practices, and family support structures are often insufficient or poorly communicated.
- **Gender and maternal bias** — deeply held assumptions about the capabilities, commitment, and appropriate roles of mothers undermine women's opportunities even when formal policies exist to prevent discrimination.

These challenges negatively impact women's recruitment, retention, advancement in the armed forces and police and their ability to access training and deployment opportunities.

Subsequently, caring responsibilities are one of the most persistent, structural barriers to women's meaningful participation in security sector institutions and UN peace operations. They shape who can deploy, who can progress, and who remains in uniform.

The Impacts

Recruitment and Retention – Driving Women Away

Caring responsibilities are a key driver of women leaving the security sector. Among 199 survey respondents, 43% said they had left, changed their work, considered doing so, or had others suggest they should, because of caring responsibilities. Women were disproportionately affected: 45% of women compared with 34% of men.

Personnel described careers being "entirely changed" by caregiving demands. Most knew of personnel who had left the service due to the challenges of managing caring responsibilities and their professional work, which often demanded long hours, perpetual availability and the ability to relocate or travel at short notice for long periods of time.

... culturally, women are expected to be at home and caring and doing all the household chores and men are supposed to be out there doing the tough stuff. So, you find that even from recruitment, the representation of female in these security sector institutions is very low... [and] you see less women participation in these operations as a result (020724UNMISS M_POL).

I've got plenty of colleagues that have dropped from full time to part time service, so they can put more effort into parental responsibilities... I've got plenty of peers [who have] had to take a break in service (Interview with male military peacekeeper; UNMISS, 05/07/2024).

Training: Missed Opportunities with Career Consequences

Among survey respondents, 36% reported that caring responsibilities had impacted their training opportunities. The barriers are both practical and cultural. Residential training, courses held at distance, and programmes scheduled during evenings or weekends exclude those with primary caring responsibilities unless alternative care arrangements — and the resources to fund them — are available. Cultural barriers such as maternal bias can also play a role. For instance, women with caring responsibilities may be discouraged from applying, assumed to be unavailable, or may be placed in roles that do not require advanced or specialised training and therefore miss out on training opportunities. Limited access to training can curtail eligibility for deployment and opportunities for career progression. Those with significant caring responsibilities are also less likely to have the time to participate in or study for mandatory courses for promotion.

... because of their caring responsibilities...there is likelihood that some...may not achieve their full potential in achieving their career goals [in the sector] (Interview with male police peacekeeper, UNMISS, 02/07/2024).

Deployment: The Most Acute Barrier

Deployment to UN peace operations represents the area where caring responsibilities create the most acute barriers. Among survey respondents, 39% of women said their caring responsibilities had impacted their deployment opportunities. For many, deployment was simply regarded as incompatible with primary caregiving: "I had never applied for a peacekeeping operation... once I had children, I didn't think that it was sort of really something that was possible." (Interview with female Australian military officer, online, 12/04/2024). many women are unable to deploy, unless they have significant supports in place, including a supportive partner and extended family. When they do deploy, they often face financial strain due to the extra costs of care, and psychological strain of family separation (not exclusive to women). Here, long deployments (for example 12 months) without travel home during R&R, compound these difficulties, alongside the costs of childcare.

Deployment processes are also often shaped by maternal bias. Mothers can be asked intrusive questions during deployment interviews about childcare arrangements and their ability to cope when separated from their children.

... at the main interview, I was asked a lot of questions about how I will handle this long period without my kids, especially because I'm a single mum. Is that gonna affect my work, my mental and physical status...? So, I don't think that that is fair play, because every mother, every father, every single person wants to do something for their career (Interview with female military peacekeeper, MINUSCA 22/10/2024)

In some cases, decisions not to deploy mothers are made on their behalf as it is assumed they would not want to – or should not – leave their children: "It's not even asking them whether they would want to deploy — it's making an assumption and a decision on their behalf" (Interview with UN staff member, UNHQ New York, 25/10/2024). These assumptions are often applied even to women without children, based on expectations that they either have, or will have, caring responsibilities. Men's caring roles, by contrast, are frequently overlooked or treated as irrelevant to operational decision-making.

... you tend not to get the overseas opportunities, because you've got caring responsibilities or someone perceives you to have caring responsibilities. Now, whether or not you do or don't, that's irrelevant. It's simply that that's how they perceive you and your value to the organisation is hugely limited because you're a female. (Interview with female military peacekeeper, UNMISS, 24/6/2024)

In some T/PCCs, women cannot deploy while their children are under two-years-old. In others, women require spousal permission to deploy. Even where formal policies are in place to protect equality of treatment and opportunity, discretion and bias can influence outcomes.

Even if the formal policies are in place to prevent that outcome, it happens informally... there's a lot of discretionary decision making there that disadvantages people with caring responsibilities, especially women. (Interview with Canadian military officer, online, 04/10/2024)

When deployed, mothers can face judgement and stigma from colleagues and even their own families and communities for being a 'bad mother' and selfish, or their motivations to deploy are questioned. This stigma harms professional reputations, causes personal distress and can strain familial relationships.

I feel like females [are] judged if they do take opportunities to deploy and be away from their kids. Because the social norm, I feel like, in any country is that it's viewed that the mother should be home with their kids. So, it feels like people are thinking that the women that do take these opportunities are selfish (Interview with female military peacekeeper, MINUSCA, 22/10/2024).

..., a lot of opportunities of deployments have been passed over to other people because they feel like I should be home with the kids or such. I feel that they've given more opportunities for my husband because the military believes that the kids will be fine with just their mother (Interview with female peacekeeper, MINUSCA, 22/10/2024).

Career Progression: A Cumulative Penalty

The cumulative impact of missed training, foregone deployments, and time away from work due to caring responsibilities often compounds into a significant career progression penalty. Even where deployments don't automatically lead to promotion, they can equip personnel

with experience, skills and knowledge that "definitely bolsters your career and gives you an edge over someone who perhaps has not had that opportunity" (Interview with male military peacekeeper, UNMISS, 04/09/2024).

Where personnel leave work on time for caregiving, they might be overlooked for promotion in favour of colleagues who are always available. Breaks in career due to care – such as maternity leave, for instance – can disrupt and stall career progression, including because of overt discrimination when personnel return to work. These impacts are most keenly felt by women due to the gendered nature of care work. Nearly half of women surveyed (47%) reported that caring responsibilities had negatively affected their career progression.

I have been informed that my maternity leave puts me further behind my counterparts that have the same years of service... I have been told that if I wanted to have kids, I should have never become a police officer. (survey respondent)

The career impact of caring responsibilities on women is especially acute in the security sector because of expectations of perpetual availability, continuous service and presenteeism. The challenge of managing caring responsibilities and work in the sector, as well as maternal bias, can also lead to women choosing or being forced into less operational or frontline roles. This contributes to women being promoted at slower rates, having fewer leadership opportunities, and facing persistent perceptions of reduced commitment. Challenges to career progression, in turn, contribute to women's attrition and underrepresentation in leadership positions.

... promotion opportunities are often bounded on, not just whether you've done the appropriate courses at the appropriate time, but did you have the appropriate prior experiences? And if you were busy being the primary carer and needing to do school drop off, then you absolutely couldn't be doing the 24-hour watchkeeping ops job (Interview with female military officer, online, 29/04/2024).

So, if you've got a young, 20-year-old lad who's got no responsibilities and is really keen...[and] they can volunteer for everything. They can be involved in everything. They look really good. But when you've got a 43-year-old woman with three children who, the second it's closing time and...[they're] out the door for childcare – 'got to pick up kids', 'I've got to cook dinner', 'clean the house', you know, all those things. I can't volunteer for the same

amount of stuff, so I automatically drop lower in the rankings purely because of my own situation. (Interview with female military peacekeeper, MONUSCO, 28/10/2024)

The Broader Consequences

Undermining Women's Meaningful Participation in Peace Operations

Caring responsibilities drives women's underrepresentation in the security sector and curtails opportunities to deploy. This directly impacts women's meaningful participation in peace operations. As of 31 December 2025, women comprise 10.08% of uniformed personnel deployed on UN peace operations. This has implications for women – their well-being, security, careers. It also has implications for operations – their work cultures, practices and outcomes. This is because it:

- **Narrows the diversity** of peacekeepers, adversely impacting efforts to engage with and build trust among diverse groups.
- **Limits the skillset, capacity, experience and knowledge** available to address increasingly complex threats.
- **Sustains a work culture that undervalues care**, including care for others and self-care, and the skills associated with care.

Narrowing the Leadership Pipeline for Women

Challenges to career progression due to missed training and deployment opportunities, gender and maternal bias, and lack of organisational support drives women's underrepresentation at leadership levels. Underrepresentation also arises because when women start a family they may leave the sector, usually at the age at which they might be going forward into middle ranks, or because they move into part-time or reservist roles, or are side-lined into non-operational roles that offer fewer opportunities for advancement. As one British military officer observed: "Quite often women's careers just fall off a cliff when they have children." (interview with female civil society representative, online, 26/03/2024).

Women's underrepresentation at leadership levels is not simply a gender equality issue — it is an operational one. When women are absent from decision-making, the diversity of perspectives that strengthens analysis, planning, and engagement with affected populations is diminished. Moreover, where women, particularly with caring responsibilities, are underrepresented in leadership positions, it is less likely that policies, structures and work

cultures will significantly change to better respond to the needs of personnel with caring responsibilities, thus sustaining a vicious circle of women's marginalisation.

... the ability to get carers into leadership is hard, until we can start to compensate for people who have had to step away for the period of time ... in order to be part of their family.

(Interview with female military officer, online, 29/04/2024).

Compromising Well-Being with Implications for Performance

The personal costs are severe. Uniformed women with caring responsibilities repeatedly spoke of "struggles", "sacrifice", "suffering", "pressure", and "guilt." Many describe suffering exhaustion and judgement (for being a 'bad mother' and lacking the capabilities and commitment for security work). Others describe working excessively hard to compensate for perceived maternal bias, contributing to chronic stress and burnout. Others speak of fractured family relationships and the emotional toll of prolonged separation from children. When organisations are attentive to issues around care — supporting personnel with caring responsibilities and responsive to personnel well-being — and where care is not treated as simply a personal or private matter, or assumed to be a weakness or distraction, these risks can be mitigated. Where organisations do not, there are further implications for work cultures, performance and readiness.

These impacts are not limited to women alone. When caring responsibilities are treated as an individual problem rather than an organisational issue, all personnel with caring responsibilities, including men, may be discouraged from seeking flexibility or support. This negatively affects overall workforce well-being.

Constraining Choices between Career and Family

Women may also experience personal and professional strain when they feel forced to choose between career progression and caring responsibilities. For many, this results in difficult decisions to delay advancement or deployment, move into less visible roles or leave the sector altogether. For others the perceived incompatibility of caring responsibilities and a security career leads to the decision not to have children at all. While some frame this as personal choice, the research reveals that such decisions are heavily constrained by institutional structures, cultural expectations, and the absence of adequate support.

My career has not allowed me to have children so far, which I regret... Unfortunately, working conditions in the field do not allow for both. The United Nations says it wants more

*women in peacekeeping missions but does not seem to do anything to make this a reality.
(survey respondent)*

What Needs to Change: Policy Recommendations

Challenges facing personnel with caring responsibilities in the security sector are not private matters to be resolved by individual women making personal sacrifices. They are systemic challenges that require systemic responses, with consequences for organisational readiness, capability as well as individual well-being and performance.

We need to think about whether or not someone who is responsible for family care can genuinely fairly participate and bring their best into the organization — or have we created a structure that was convenient, but doesn't allow it." (Interview with female Australian military officer, online, 29/04/2024).

Strengthen Human Resources Policy

- Implement standardised, family-friendly policies including provision of or subsidised wrap-around childcare, and flexible working practices where operationally feasible.
- Review promotion criteria and career pathways to ensure they do not indirectly discriminate against personnel with caring responsibilities — including by reconsidering rigid age thresholds and time-bound career milestones that disproportionately disadvantage women.
- Ensure maternity and parental leave policies are accompanied by protections against side-lining, and that personnel returning from leave are reintegrated into meaningful roles with full access to training and promotion pathways.

Support Career Development and Leadership Pipelines

- Consider adjusting career structures — including recruitment age limits, promotion timelines, and retirement ages — to accommodate career breaks that disproportionately affect women during their childbearing years.
- Explore "front-loading" early career development for women to accelerate progression through initial career gates before caring responsibilities are most likely to intensify.
- Advertise deployment opportunities, including UN peace operations, more widely across services and ranks, ensuring women receive the same information and encouragement as their male peers.

- Scheduling training so that personnel with caring responsibilities can attend – for instance, consider online training or providing childcare facilities where residential training cannot be avoided.

Bolster Support during Deployments

- Expand the availability of shorter (6-month) deployment rotations for personnel with young children, with safeguards to ensure that opting for shorter deployments does not carry career penalties.
- Improve predictability in deployment (and posting) timing and provide adequate advance notice to allow personnel to plan care arrangements, where possible.
- Support travel home during R&R on longer deployments, including to maintain family connections and reduce the psychological burden on caregivers.
- Prioritise reliable internet and communications access across all peace operations to enable deployed personnel to maintain contact with their families.
- Integrate care issues, including how to manage the stressor of family separation on deployment, into pre-deployment training.
- Review policies and structures that support families of personnel on deployment, including to reduce worry about families while personnel are deployed

Challenge Bias

- Develop and deliver targeted training for commanders and decision-makers on maternal bias and its impact on decision-making, including for deployment and promotion
- Reframe care as a shared responsibility: policies aimed at supporting caregivers should target all personnel, not only women, to avoid reinforcing the assumption that care is exclusively women's work.
- Ensure that decisions about deployment and career opportunities are made transparently and in consultation with the individuals concerned — never on their behalf based on assumptions about their preferences or capabilities.
- Ensure codes of conduct explicitly refer to non-tolerance for discrimination on the grounds of gender and parental status or other caring responsibilities, communicate this widely and take measures in the event of non-compliance.

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.

ⁱⁱ UN Women and Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2025) *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2025*. New York: UN Women and Department of Economic and Social Affairs. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-09/progress-on-the-sustainable-development-goals-the-gender-snapshot-2025-en.pdf>.