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Benefits and Barriers to Women's Participation in Peacekeeping

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).¹

Rates of women's uniformed participation in UN peace operations have improved in recent decades and since the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (on Women, Peace and Security). Currently, women constitute around ten percent of all uniformed UN peacekeepers, from just one percent in the mid-1990s.

This policy brief considers the perceived benefits and barriers to women's participation in peace operations as described by peacekeepers themselves. It examines the views of 553 research participants including uniformed (police and military) personnel, UN leaders and civil society. In particular, it draws from interviews with those deployed to three current UN missions (UNMISS, MINUSCA, MONUSCO), from three significant troop contributing countries (India, Indonesia, and the UK) and personnel based in UN HQ in New York.

The research reinforces existing research regarding the benefits of women's participation in peace operations but identifies the persistent normative and institutional barriers that undermine progress.

Key Findings

- Respondents overwhelmingly agree that women's participation in peace operations offer significant benefits (Table 1). These benefits are described in three ways:
 1. Like men, women can provide skilled service to a peace operation and their inclusion increases the pool of potential applicants

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.

2. Women’s gendered identities — and the gendered norms associated with them — can bring unique benefits to peace operations, particularly when engaging with civilian communities
 3. Women’s gendered life experiences (in terms of caring, social engagement, and careers, etc) can offer a useful diversity in terms of skills and knowledge to peace operations.
- Respondents also agreed that women’s participation in peace operations face persistent barriers. These barriers stem from gendered social norms that position men as ‘natural’ peacekeepers and drivers of security sector work. This fuels gender inequality and filters into policy, institutional arrangements and organisational culture. This includes:
 1. Discriminatory attitudes and assumptions about men and women’s ‘nature’ and ‘natural abilities’ in security sector work
 2. Discriminatory policies and practices that marginalise women from participation in peace operations, such as career structures that preference men, uneven resourcing for activities largely performed by men and women, or marriage and pregnancy bans for women.
 3. Long-standing androcentric assumptions about security sector work that mitigate against women’s participation such as age limits for deployment, outdated physical standards tests, assumptions about child caring responsibilities or women’s capacities in the security sector.

Benefits to the deployment of women in UN peace operations	Barriers to the deployment of women in UN peace operations
Facilitates diversity in peace operations by including diverse identities, life experiences and skillsets	Gendered social norms that undermine women’s legitimacy as peacekeepers
Women may be able to establish relationships with civilian communities, particularly local women and children more easily than men	Gendered career structures that prioritise or privilege men’s career experiences
Women may serve as role models and examples of gender equality in sites of UN operation	Imposition of age limits on deployments can disadvantage women
Women may have a positive impact in reducing SEA on mission	Imposition on androcentric physical standards can unnecessarily disadvantage women
Women’s presence may facilitate greater reporting of GBV in operations	Infrastructure issues on deployment can exclude women
	Lack of organisational support for pregnancy and childcare has a greater exclusionary impact on women

Table 1: Consolidated benefits and barriers to uniformed women’s participation in peace operations as identified by research participants

Discussion

Peacekeeping remains male dominated. According to our research participants, uniformed security sector work is still understood by many in the sector as ‘men’s work’.² However, the gradual recognition that peace and security politics are gendered has gained momentum since the adoption of UNSCR 1325 (2000) and the subsequent WPS agenda. The WPS agenda promotes gender responsive approaches to peace, including by increasing the number of women personnel in peace operations. It provides gender-responsive guidance for contemporary UN missions alongside other policy frameworks including the UN’s *Gender Responsive UN Peace Operations Policy* (2024) and the UN’s *Gender Parity Strategy* (2018-2028).

Gender Norms in Peacekeeping

Research participants reported persistent gendered norms that shape their experiences of peace operations. These are gendered binaries that position men as the natural, legitimate and capable peacekeepers and women as abnormal, illegitimate or tokenistic peacekeepers. While some believe that these norms reflect men and women’s ‘inherent natures’, others described them as highly socialised norms that had become ‘naturalised’ across the security sector. Many noted that these norms are dynamic, but shifts towards gender equal attitudes are slow, non-linear and inconsistent.

A peacekeeper in UNMISS highlights that gendered assumptions about caring responsibilities see women less likely to be deployed, while the caring responsibilities of male personnel are often overlooked: “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.’” (interview with UN civilian staff, UNMISS, 29/07/2024)

It was noted that these norms infiltrate all aspects of peacekeeping, including the experiences of individual peacekeepers and the policies, practices, institutional arrangements and organisational cultures of the sector.

Women’s Participation in Peace Operations - Benefits

Research participants generally agree that women’s participation strengthens peace operations by offering a greater pool of applicants, a diverse workforce, and different sets of life experiences and, in some cases, skillsets. Some respondents stress that regardless of gender, the increased participation of women in peace operations can increase the overall number of skilled and professional deployments.

² See also Carreiras, H. (2010) ‘Gendered Culture in Peacekeeping Operations,’ *International Peacekeeping*, 17(4): 471-485. doi: 10.1080/13533312.2010.516655; Duncanson, C. and Woodward, R. (2016) ‘Regendering the Military: Theorizing Women’s Military Participation,’ *Security Dialogue*, 47(1): 3-21. doi: 10.1177/0967010615614137; Karim S and Beardsley K. (2013) ‘Female Peacekeepers and Gender Balancing: Token Gestures or Informed Policymaking?’ *International Interactions*, 39(4): 461-488. doi: 10.1080/03050629.2013.805131; Koeszegi, S.T., Zedlacher, E. and Hudribusch, R. (2014) ‘The War Against the Female Soldier? The Effects of Masculine Culture on Workplace Aggression,’ *Armed Forces & Society*, 40(2): 226-251. doi: 10.1177/0095327X12460019; Newby and Sebag (2021) ‘Gender Sidestreaming?’

At the operational level, women — by virtue of their gender identity — can undertake roles that their male counterparts cannot. In particular interviewees acknowledge that women peacekeepers can establish relationships of trust with local women and children in sites where local gender norms or social contexts may prohibit men from doing so. Across all research sites, it was noted that these relationships enable data gathering to support humanitarian operations, better responses to sexual and gender-based violence and more appropriate treatment of women during security searches or as detainees. Participants agree that this enhances the overall relationship between the UN mission and local communities and in turn, improves mission outcomes.

It is also widely reported that women peacekeepers can promote gender equality within missions and to local communities. Participants argue that women peacekeepers are important role models for local women and girls and can model a more equal practice of gender relations to a local community.³

Many participants agree that the presence of women deployed to peace missions may reduce cases of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) perpetrated by peacekeepers. Some argue that the presence of women peacekeepers has a regulatory or disciplining effect on the culture of peace missions, making male personnel less ‘free’ to engage in SEA. For others, women’s presence generates a more professional culture which discourages such behaviour, either through women’s active leadership or the anticipation that it would more likely be reported. Others argue that local women are more likely to report SEA cases to women peacekeepers, increasing accountability. While some caution that women peacekeepers can themselves become the target of predation, or bystanders to abuse, others note that women are far less likely than men to perpetrate SEA.

Nonetheless, there is disquiet among some participants about aligning women’s contributions primarily to their gender. Some note that this could have the unanticipated consequence of stereotyping women’s contributions and limiting their roles to those where they are seen to have a unique advantage. Others express concern that it encourages essentialist assumptions that women are ‘naturally’ good at some tasks such as relationship-building. Others exhibit concern that a focus upon gender can limit thinking about diversity in two key ways: by marginalising the importance of other identity factors such as ethnicity, religion, language, and so forth; and decoupling gender from discussions regarding skills and training.

...we’re always thinking in operational terms of women’s participation, it’s like we’re instrumentalising the women. To say, if we get more women here, they’ll be able to talk to a population. But in fact, if you get more women into the military, into peacekeeping, they’ll be able to do a lot more. They’ll be able to, you know, influence planning... We just

³ See also Nagel, R.U., Fin, K. and Maenza, J. (2021) *Gendered Impacts on Operational Effectiveness of UN Peace Operations*. Washington: Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security. <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/resource/gendered-impacts-on-operational-effectiveness-of-un-peace-operations/>.

seem to really focus on that engagement piece (Interview with UN civilian staff, UNHQ, 29/20/2024)

Women's Participation in Peace Operations - Barriers

Women face interconnected cultural, institutional, organisational and socioeconomic barriers to their participation in peace operations. As noted, these stem from the entrenched gender norms that question women's suitability for peacekeeping roles. While it is particularly pronounced in societies where women's engagement in public sphere activities, specifically in the security sector, conflicts with societal expectations,⁴ barriers persist even in communities with open commitments and claims to gender equality.

Gendered norms facilitate discriminatory policies and practices within the security sector. For example, marriage restrictions requiring single status for recruitment disproportionately affect women,⁵ while age limits disadvantage women who enter security sector careers later, or whose career progression is slower due to family considerations.⁶ Physical standards frequently reflect male-centric norms that may not align with actual job requirements,⁷ while male-dominated command structures limit advancement opportunities and unconscious (and conscious) bias systematically excludes qualified women.⁸

The intersection of professional service with family obligations represents perhaps the most complex barrier. Women continue to bear disproportionate responsibility for childcare and domestic duties, even in dual-military/police families.⁹ Inadequate organisational support for childcare during deployments compounds these challenges. In addition, peace mission sites often lack the infrastructure necessary to support women's participation effectively, including appropriate facilities, equipment, and uniforms.¹⁰ Pregnancy policies or informal norms forcing women to leave the service create career disruptions affecting only female personnel,¹¹ while protective policies or practices regarding dangerous deployments can perpetuate exclusion from operational roles.¹²

⁴ Hudson, V.M., Ballif-Spanvill, B., Caprioli, M. and Emmett C.F. (2012) *Sex and World Peace*. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁵ Herbert, M.S. (1998). *Camouflage Isn't Only For Combat: Gender, Sexuality, and Women in the Military*. New York: New York University Press.

⁶ Carreiras, H. (2006) *Gender and the Military: Women in the Armed Forces of Western Democracies*. London: Routledge.

⁷ Domitrovich, J. (2017) 'The Human Factor: Women in the Military and Combat Integration,' *Joint Force Quarterly*, 86(3): 72-79.

⁸ King, A. (2013) *The Combat Soldier: Infantry Tactics and Cohesion in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁹ Hochschild, A. (1989) *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home*. New York: Viking; Williams, J. (2000) *Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What to do About it*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁰ Wright, K.A., Foran, H.M., Wood, M.D., Eckford, R.D. and McGurk, D. (2016) 'Alcohol Problems, Aggression, and Other Externalizing Behaviors After Return From Deployment: Understanding the Role of Combat Exposure, Internalizing Symptoms, and Social Environment,' *Journal of Clinical Medicine*, 5(4): 40; Bridges, D. and Horsfall, D. (2009) 'Increasing Operational Effectiveness in UN Peacekeeping: Toward a Gender-Balanced Force,' *Armed Forces and Society*, 36(1): 120-130. doi: 10.1177/0095327X08327818.

¹¹ Brownson, C. (2014) 'The Battle for Equivalency: Female US Marines Discuss Sexuality, Physical Fitness, and Military Leadership,' *Armed Forces and Society*, 40(4): 765-788. doi: 10.1177/0095327X14523957.

¹² Jennings, K. (2011) 'Women's Participation in UN Peacekeeping Operations: Agents of Change or Stranded Symbols?' *NOREF Report*: 2-11. <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/137505/Women's%20participation%20in%20UN%20peacekeeping.pdf>.

... the low representation of women in missions [is] because they have to do a lot more family balancing.” (Interview with male police peacekeeper, MONUSCO, 31/10/2024).

I was bringing 20 [female soldiers]. But I need accommodation... We can accommodate one or two, but [more] must be budgeted. If it was not budgeted, we cannot provide [for them] so [we’ve] been stopping them.” (Interview with civilian, MINUSCA, 24/10/2024).

So, MINUSCA was one of the most dangerous missions. So that’s why the number of female deployments is really low.... they have like a mindset that they don’t want to, you know, carry females [back home] in the body bag. (Interview with female armed forces officer, online, 30/04/2024).