

Women in Peacekeeping Operations: What We Heard Report

By Kim Beaulieu

2024-02-20

On January 24th, 2024, the Research Network on Women, Peace and Security held a roundtable on women in peacekeeping operations. The roundtable brought together diverse scholars and practitioners working on peacekeeping-related issues. It explored issues that have received less attention regarding gender and peacekeeping. It focused on two main themes: situating women in peacekeeping operations, and reviewing training. During the first half of the roundtable, the participants discussed the impact of including more women on unit dynamics, the effect of local gender norms on women's roles and ability to carry out their tasks, and the consequences of some of the gendered assumptions we often hear about women peacekeepers. The second half of the roundtable focused on the shortcomings related to specific aspects of training and possible pathways for reforms. This report is a brief "what we heard" report summarizing what we learned from this roundtable.

Background: Since the adoption of Resolution 1325 in 2000, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda has become a crucial normative framework in the United Nations (UN). Part of this agenda advocates for the inclusion of a gender perspective into peacekeeping missions and a greater involvement of women as peacekeepers (United Nations Security Council 2000, 2). Consequently, the UN has consciously tried to integrate these two objectives across its different bodies, emphasizing the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO). In many ways, these calls were successful because women's participation in peacekeeping missions has steadily increased since the adoption of Resolution 1325. However, despite the UN's repeated efforts and commitments, women's participation in peacekeeping operations remains low. As of November 2023, women constituted 9.12% of uniformed personnel¹ (United Nations 2023). This is a stark increase compared to the 20 uniformed women who served between 1957 and 1989, but still below the UN's target in its Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy for 2018-2028.²

¹ Uniformed personnel accounts for Experts on Mission, Formed Police Units, Individual Police, Staff Officers, and Troops. For disaggregated data on Uniformed Personnel to the UN by Mission, Personnel Type, and Gender, see https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/07_gender_statistics_66_september_2023.pdf.

² The goal for the military component (contracted military staff, experts on mission, and staff officers) is to reach 25% by 2028. For contingent troops, because including more women proves more challenging, the goal is 15% (United Nations 2019).

PART I: Situation Women in Peacekeeping Operations

Numbers Matter, But...

As mentioned by participants, including more women in peacekeeping operations is crucial for several reasons. First, having multiple women together in a unit can significantly boost their confidence and empower them to address issues, given that acting as a whistle-blower often poses more significant risks for women than their male counterparts. In addition, including more women can decrease the pressure that would otherwise be on one woman to represent the entire gender, meaning doing everything the “right way” to counter biases and stereotypes. As a participant mentioned, there is a lot of pressure on women to conform and be accepted by their peers. Therefore, boosting women’s representation could positively influence their ability to raise issues and lessen the burden of conforming to gender norms.

Moreover, seeing more women deployed at home and abroad has had a positive impact. While the expectation that women should change male behavior, or any behavior, can be problematic, increasing the number of women in these roles can challenge prevailing gender norms and positively influence perceptions of women’s roles and capabilities. An illustrative example involves driving—a task where women are often stereotypically viewed as less competent than men. However, as an individual from the Canadian Armed Forces observed, the skills required for navigating mud during the rainy season closely align with those needed for driving in the Canadian winter snow. Consequently, a Canadian woman was the most adept driver among her peers, who were unaccustomed to such conditions. Similarly, in the Ghanaian Armed Forces, the notion of women drivers initially faced skepticism. However, attitudes began to shift positively as the military witnessed the proficiency of women drivers in operational theaters. Additionally, one participant noted that peacekeeping missions sometimes offer the only opportunity for women to be deployed in countries like Bangladesh or Jordan precisely because other women are present. Thus, deploying more women can help to challenge entrenched stereotypes and misconceptions in certain instances.

However, participants also acknowledged that, despite the quantitative approach, it is crucial to focus on the qualitative aspects of women’s participation. One participant stated, “We want to say that if we have more women, it solves the problem. But that is a very quantitative approach that does not tell the story”. Simply increasing numbers does not guarantee the full and meaningful participation of women. Our experiences of increasing women in the armed forces in Canada have shown that the presence of more women does not automatically result in a more inclusive environment. Therefore, assuming that this strategy would be effective elsewhere is unrealistic. Only having more women may lead to complacency, where there’s an assumption that gender perspectives are automatically integrated, thereby reducing the need for active engagement with these perspectives. Additionally, women might face a form of protective bias from their male

counterparts, resulting in their assignment to less risky areas during deployments, which inadvertently sidelines them from full participation. As one participant highlighted, this is exacerbated by climate change because things like water shortages create different needs. For example, another participant identified the need for more water for menstrual hygiene as an additional burden by male superiors. Such kinds of structural issues caused by climate change make it more difficult for women to participate in a meaningful way by suggesting they can be an additional burden.

Thus, while meeting numerical quotas for women's participation is often viewed as a victory, it can conceal women's experiences in peacekeeping operations. Participants highlighted that numbers matter, but we need more than a simple quantitative approach to understand and address the challenges of integrating a gender perspective in peacekeeping operations. Moreover, while the UN has directed more resources towards uniformed women, a significant gap persists in engaging with the civilian aspects of peacekeeping missions, where a larger contingent of women encounters similar challenges.

Intersectionality Remains Crucial

Participants also highlighted power and accessibility imbalances between international and local staff. National staff play a pivotal role in ensuring the sustainability of missions, given that international staff will eventually withdraw. Thus, enhancing the representation of women within national staff is crucial for long-term success. This introduces unique challenges and dynamics. For instance, in South Sudan, recruiting women from and living in the country for national staff roles is particularly challenging, partly due to the low literacy rates among women. Job specifications and the stipulated qualifications frequently set unattainable criteria for many women. This situation signals a critical need for the UN to reevaluate its appreciation and recognition of skills in local staff. The issue is often not the absence of skills among women but rather the lack of formal credentials or certifications that are required based on the criteria established in New York.

Similarly, another participant highlighted the impact of class on employment opportunities. Access to UN jobs is usually easier for members of elite circles who are familiar with international-level interviewing expectations and practices. In contexts where unemployment is so high, these jobs are highly sought-after. For example, as one participant mentioned, the General Service (GS) staff at the UN headquarters reveals a predominance of women. However, the situation is markedly different within mission national GS staff, where women are significantly underrepresented compared to their professional officer counterparts and international female staff. Consequently, the high demand for these administrative roles at the national level overrides the typical gender dynamics that often place women in such positions.

More broadly, it is imperative to consider how various contexts influence racial and gender dynamics and perceptions of different troop-contributing countries (TCCs) and their members. For

example, a researcher noted that in Lebanon, Sri Lankan peacekeepers guarding UNIFIL's entry points faced racial discrimination in the same way other Sri Lankan nationals living in the country and typically engaged in road work or garbage collection did throughout the country. As highlighted by the participant, "There is this contextual and ingrained rebellion against someone having a position of authority when there is a racial dimension to the local economy". This creates particular tensions and power dynamics. Similarly, the domestic roles predominantly occupied by Indonesian, Filipino, and Ethiopian women in Lebanon further complicate the reception of peacekeepers from these nations, especially when tasked with authoritative roles at checkpoints. These examples highlight a broader, often overlooked challenge in UN peacekeeping: the critical impact of local racial and gender dynamics on the authority, mobility, and overall effectiveness of peacekeeping operations.

Local Contexts and Gender Norms

Moreover, participants shared insights on the assumption that women peacekeepers might have better access to local communities, with some experiences supporting and others challenging this idea. One participant recounted her deployment experience in a community where all soldiers were perceived negatively because of previous encounters. Due to this negative perception, peacekeepers could not get past a checkpoint to reach the next village. The participant was the only woman in her team. After speaking with the local community, they agreed to let her pass, protected by the other members of her team, because she was perceived as a caretaker. Playing on the local gender norms, she was able to create this space to access the checkpoint because she was viewed as nurturing rather than threatening. This anecdote suggests that local gender norms can sometimes be leveraged to the advantage of women peacekeepers.

However, it is important not to generalize such stories. When it comes to intelligence gathering, it is often mentioned that women are better at it because of their "privileged access" to the local population. However, as one participant highlighted, many women are instrumentalized within their own teams and sent off to acquire information without prior training. The assumption that women are better communicators and that, as a result, people respond better to them leads to a systemic lack of sufficient and appropriate training. "Ultimately, what matters the most is the level of training to do a job beyond what identity you put forward". Part of that training also concerns language acquisition. Not speaking local languages can hinder both men and women in collecting information. Another participant stressed how intelligence gathering is often messy and ad hoc. Recognizing this, it becomes essential to establish clear mechanisms and pathways for both male and female peacekeepers to share knowledge and ensure that information can reach decision-makers and leadership effectively. Thus, while gender may play a role in intelligence gathering, other factors are more critical. Indeed, successful intelligence gathering relies more on training and clear pathways for information flow than on gender.

Moreover, while many may agree that women and men have different strengths when accessing the population or gathering intelligence, “[w]e do not just need women. We need both men and women because they bring different perspectives, understandings, and experiences of what is happening”. Given the volatile nature of conflict contexts, the key lies in understanding the specific situation and determining who is best positioned at that moment to achieve the desired outcome. Another participant stated, “I get nervous hearing women are better at it. [...] My concern is that we need multiple sensors from multiple perspectives to get this right”. In this sense, it is less about gender and more about how individuals can collaborate and utilize their combined strengths.

Leadership As a Key Piece of the Puzzle

Finally, a recurrent theme discussed throughout the roundtable was the importance of leadership, with a consensus on its critical role in shaping behaviors and attitudes toward gender inclusion across all levels of military operations. Progressive leaders who set clear expectations for inclusive behavior can significantly influence the organizational culture. As one participant mentioned: “What we saw was behaviors that were mimicked because leaders had an expectation of behavior that would happen in their command, and we saw this permeate all layers”. One participant mentioned her experience in Mali, where a change in leadership opened up a significant space for engagement with gender dynamics. This demonstrates the considerable impact individual leaders can have on gender equality efforts. Another participant mentioned that how soldiers view and deal with misconduct, particularly sexual misconduct, depends a lot on their relationship with their senior leaders. A positive relationship with a senior leader enhances the likelihood of misconduct being taken seriously and reported to higher ranks. Hence, leadership at all levels is instrumental in cultivating a supportive environment.

Conversely, ineffective leadership can significantly contribute to creating a hostile work environment. One participant noted that many women linked their negative experiences in peacekeeping missions to poor leadership. Although mechanisms for reporting sexual assault or misconduct are generally well-established, both domestically and internationally, strategies for addressing poor or toxic leadership, such as micromanagement and mistreatment by supervisors, are less clear. The absence of straightforward mechanisms to address these issues underscores the critical need for gender-responsive leadership in tackling such challenges. It was observed that leaders are not always held accountable for the environment they create within their missions, units, and overall culture. The ability to foster positive environments is frequently overlooked in the selection process for senior leadership positions despite its significant importance.

PART II: Training

What Is Missing?

The second part of the roundtable focused explicitly on training. Many participants brought forward the need for more adequate training for peacekeepers nationally and at the UN. At the national level, Canada needs to improve when it comes to pre-deployment training. The training is not done by experts and is often obsolete. The same people are constantly called upon, which creates an echo chamber instead of encouraging a diversity of perspectives and experiences. Also, the civil-military cooperation course at the Canadian Peace Support Training Center does not sufficiently incorporate the WPS Agenda. This is a significant oversight given that the curriculum on engaging with local populations omits discussions on gender-related issues. A participant mentioned, “It shows that gender is not a priority”. Moreover, one participant highlighted how the specific skills people learn are irrelevant to the mission. There is barely an hour spent on culture and no mention of crucial information such as the status of forces agreement with the country of deployment. In short, “It teaches you what you do not need and omits what you do”.

Within the UN, participants have identified multiple problems and needs. First, a participant pointed out that training in the UN could be much better and is among the first things to get cut. The UN provides a variety of online courses that mainly focus on checking off requirements. However, it needs more contextual training, which is vital for the effective deployment of personnel. Often, UN staff are sent into the field requiring more fundamental knowledge or understanding of the local context and the complexities of the environment they are entering. Another participant mentioned the need for more relevant language, intelligence gathering, and conflict resolution training at the UN level.

Additionally, someone raised the need to reform leadership training at the UN. The mission leadership often consists of civilians trained only in civilian matters. For instance, the UN Special Representatives of the Secretary-General are generally unaware of the challenges of including more uniformed women in peacekeeping missions, which is a complete blind spot in their training. As we know, leadership attitudes matter across missions and impact both the military and civilian sides. In this way, the participants highly criticized the current siloed approach within the UN.

Institutional Shortcomings

Another crucial aspect discussed relates to institutional shortcomings. One participant mentioned that training is often seen as the straightforward part of the equation because it is relatively inexpensive and politically advantageous. However, it locates the problem at the individual level and loses sight of the larger picture, which is where people go and what they *can* do with their training. Another participant pointed out that some TTCs lack the necessary resources to facilitate women’s deployment. She explained that in the case of one country, women

commanders in the Navy had never set foot on a ship besides short trips due to the lack of appropriate accommodations. Similarly, many women cannot drive tanks because the vehicles have not been adapted for the average height differences between men and women. This scenario leads to a situation where, despite extensive training, women find themselves unable to deploy in certain contexts, perpetuating negative stereotypes. Thus, it is crucial to avoid viewing training from such a narrow perspective, leaving aside the main issues: the frequent lack of equipment, leadership, or capability to implement gender mainstreaming effectively. Addressing these is essential for ensuring a positive and impactful experience.

Potential Ways to Move Forward

Some positive examples were also mentioned during the roundtable. One participant highlighted Indonesia's approach, where women undergo a two week training before the main pre-deployment training. This extra preparation allows women to acquire or refine essential skills for full mission participation, leveling the playing field and boosting their confidence and competence. In Canada, participants recognized the apparent challenges in delivering relevant training, such as the small scale of missions, the different timing of deployment and training, and the geographical diversity of personnel. As a solution, deployed personnel initiated a weekly call to connect those currently in the field with those about to be deployed in the same country, facilitating an exchange of experiences. Another participant mentioned how the UN should work toward implementing swift, deployable response mechanisms to address concerns raised within mission environments, focusing mainly on leadership aspects. This would allow the mission to adjust promptly when personnel raise issues.

The overarching message regarding solutions underscores the necessity of a systemic approach that integrates both civilian and military aspects. As a participant pointed out, we cannot continue to view this in a siloed manner; it is essential to connect the dots. Otherwise, we risk undermining the sustainability of these efforts. True sustainability demands a unified effort across the entire system, encompassing all dimensions, to move in a concerted direction.

Bibliography

- United Nations. 2019. “Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy 2018-2028.” Department of Peace Operations.
- . 2023. “Uniformed Personnel Contributing Countries by Ranking: Experts on Mission, Formed Police Units, Individual Police, Staff Officer, and Troops.” 2023.
https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/02_country_ranking_68_november_2023_revision_1.pdf.
- United Nations Security Council. 2000. “Resolution 1325 (2000).” S/RES/1325.