

Women Peacekeepers in United Nations Peace Operations: Critical to Mitigate Gender-Based Violence in a Mission Area

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Abstract

United Nations Peace Operations (UNPOs) have been used as one of the successful tools in a protracted conflict to enable a country to transition into a peaceful existence and long-term development. Despite scepticism, this endeavour has met with many successes over the past 75 years. Unfortunately, the world continues to witness ever-increasing conflicts, replete with different forms of gender-based violence, often targeting women and children. In such situations, the United Nations (UN) and most member states acknowledge that women peacekeepers can play a crucial role. UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1325 (2000) also recognised the role of women peacekeepers as an enabling factor. With the UNSC Resolution 1820 (2008), the UNPOs came under increased pressure to prevent conflict-related sexual violence, which is largely attributed to local security actors. In this article, a systematic review of the academic and other literature was used to ascertain the efficacy and effectiveness of women peacekeepers in the mitigation of gender-based violence. The role of women peacekeepers was considered a crucial independent variable for the protection outcome. The article brings out that women peacekeepers play a critical

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role in peacekeeping missions, contributing their unique perspectives and skills that enhance operational effectiveness. The UN has been setting targets for the number of women peacekeepers and most contributing countries are obliging. However, they also face significant challenges in their recruitment, training, deployment, and participation. It has also been highlighted that the UN field operations are still heavily biased towards male-dominated and aggressive infantry-dominant deployments. The results are also dependent on the sufficient presence of women peacekeepers in the sector. The article addresses a significant gap in academic discourse, as the influence of women in peacekeeping is infrequently discussed and scholarly opinions on their actual impact differ. It points towards a limited yet positive influence of women peacekeepers on gender-based violence and overall mission effectiveness.

Introduction

The adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 in 2000 formalised the persistent demand for women to play their part in peace and security. The Resolution recognised the disproportionate impact of armed conflicts on women and the importance of their equal voice in peace, security, and decision-making. Adopted on 19 Jun 2008, the UNSCR 1820 (2008) asked the United Nations Peace Operations (UNPOs) to prevent Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV), attributed mostly to local security actors. It condemned the use of sexual violence as a tool of war and highlighted that in such intense conflicts, most victims are women and children, who need special attention from the peacekeeping community. Motivated by political, military, or economic objectives to control territory or resources, CRSV is frequently and deliberately used to target civilians, triggering their massive displacement. Women and girls continue to be the prime victims of CRSV, which is also attributable to the existing gender discrimination and inequality.¹

Studies on the effectiveness of the Protection of Civilians (PoC) mandate reveal that host nations obtain support from bilaterally deployed forces and private military contractors to

achieve their security objectives, thus, further aggravating the situation for the locals.² To enhance its PoC effectiveness, the role of women peacekeepers has been advocated as the most desirable step as a corollary to UNSCR 1325. Action 19 of the Summit of the Future in Sep 2024 specifically laid down that “We will accelerate the implementation of our commitments on women, peace, and security”. With progress towards its implementation, more women are serving the UNPOs as a part of the United Nations (UN) military, staff, UN Civilian Police (UNPOL) and other non-uniformed staff, as compared to 2000.

There are mixed inferences on the efficacy and effectiveness of women in peacekeeping, though the positive contributions outweigh the naysayers. Responding to the UN Department of Peace Operations (UNDPO)’s call, many Troop and Police Contributing Countries (T/PCCs) are fielding more women peacekeepers. It is well known that the rates of sexual and other forms of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) are higher in areas of armed conflict than in non-conflict-affected settings.³ PoC remains a top priority of all UN-mandated UNPOs in such settings, where women and children remain the primary victims. It is in these situations that women peacekeepers can provide an effective bridge towards peace.

The objective of this article is to analyse different efficacy perspectives, UN efforts of gender mainstreaming, and barriers to the women peacekeepers’ efforts to mitigate GBV in conflict-ridden areas. The article is based on a systematic review of available literature, various UN reports on the topic, and personal experiences through various interventions in the seminars, conferences, and training of women peacekeepers. Data is based on the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, Scopus Indexed Journals, UN web, the United Service Institution (USI) of India archives, and UNDPO web pages, mostly from the last 10 years. The article discusses prior literature, inferences drawn on the key topics, and conclusions. Key words used for the search were women peacekeepers, GBV, protection mandate, measuring effectiveness of peace operations, and women, peace, and security.

Perspectives on the Efficacy of Women Peacekeepers

There are studies on both sides of the divide, encouraging or remaining neutral on the efficacy of the inclusion of more women peacekeepers. As per some authors⁴, women's contributions are highly undervalued due to systemic challenges. There is an intrinsic link between women and intelligence, adeptness in negotiation, and socio-emotional intelligence—skills crucial for handling 'Masculine' security concerns like terrorism and national threats. In this case, examples of Indonesians in Palestine and the Indian peacekeepers in Liberia can be considered a great success. Indonesian peacekeepers contributed immensely to the maintenance of physical security and empowering women and children, addressing cases of sexual violence, and advocating for gender equality.⁵ In Palestine, a study showed that the involvement of female peacekeepers in the prevention of GBV can be a stimulus for other countries to participate in helping and reducing such cases.⁶ Similarly, the Indian formed police unit deployed from 2007 to 2016 in Liberia transformed the societal mindset and encouraged more women to participate in local civil administration, a fact acknowledged by Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf.⁷ As per UN Police Adviser Stefan Feller, the 'All-female Indian unit played an outstanding role in Liberia since 2007 and put the soul of UNSCR 1325 into operational action and visibility'.⁸

South African experiences in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Darfur/Sudan revealed that most national armed forces have infantry troops for the UNPO duties and, therefore, women come under tremendous performance pressure. There is a pressure to assimilate masculine values to be recognised as 'Good' soldiers.⁹ Continuous push for the inclusion of more women has an assumption of increased operational efficacy related to women's 'Added Value' and for greater gender equality. Instrumentalist arguments prove contrary to this and may undermine gender equality. Under pressure, women peacekeepers try to live up to the high expectations by fitting into gender stereotypes. Rather than increasing gender equality, such efforts risk transforming the female 'Added Value' into an 'Added Burden'.¹⁰

The efficacy of women peacekeepers in reducing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) of locals by male peacekeepers has also been a reason for the UN to encourage more women

peacekeepers. As per the UN data of 05 Dec 2024, there are over 700 paternity and child support claims implicating UNPO personnel since 2006. 95 per cent of these involve military or police personnel from member states, who are responsible for addressing these claims. More than 70 per cent claims remain unresolved, leaving 500 children without much-needed legal recognition and financial support.¹¹ In such a situation, women peacekeepers can deter such misadventures and do a reality check on locals, while exerting a positive influence on their male colleagues. Studies point out that this dual role, tending to the local needs and regulating the behaviour of male peacekeepers, places women peacekeepers under a double burden. Recruiting more women into UNPOs due to the perceived unique contributions may avoid unintended consequences for the locals. However, the consequent rise of sexual violence by male peacekeepers against their women colleagues has also been an alarming factor. A study on the UN Missions in DRC revealed that many female peacekeepers experienced exploitation or harassment during their UNPO missions.¹² A study by the International Peace Institute revealed that sexual abuse was a major threat to uniformed peacekeepers, especially women. Among all survey participants, approximately one in 10 said they experienced sexual abuse during their tenure in a peacekeeping mission, while a similar proportion witnessed sexual abuse against another peacekeeper.¹³

Despite the pitfalls, many studies infer that women's participation in UNPOs has many tangible benefits for a conflict-ridden society. Summit of the Future emphasised inclusive structures under Action 19, where it considered full, equal, safe, and meaningful participation of women in decision-making at all levels of peace and security, as essential to achieve sustainable peace.¹⁴ The UNDPO has always been persistent in its efforts to increase women in various UN missions. Such deployments encourage empowering the women in the host community, easier collation of data on the survivors of GBV, support for female ex-combatants, and making the UN force approachable to women in a community. The presence of women peacekeepers also helps to reduce conflict and confrontation, besides better access and support for local women. As was seen in Indian formed police unit's deployment in Liberia, women peacekeepers also become role models for the community. Another important fact is that in a

volatile security environment, women at checkpoints create a less confrontational atmosphere.

The impact of women peacekeepers on local populations was also studied in some other missions, showing a potential positive influence on reported sexual violence cases, though the overall impact was found to be limited, perhaps due to the limitation of numbers. The study views that the current UN approach—simply deploying women to peacekeeping missions—fails to address the underlying issues rooted in military deployment, signalling a need for more comprehensive strategies to bring in a lasting change.¹⁵

Gender Mainstreaming and United Nations' Initiatives

The UNDPO has been working arduously with the T/PCCs to increase the number of women in line with the UN Secretary-General's Action for Peacekeeping initiative. The UN carried out a study on gender parity to ensure that the uniformed component of UNPOs is diverse and inclusive of women, reflecting the communities that the UN serves.¹⁶ To this end, over recent years, the UN has set successive targets: the UNSCR 2242 (2015) called for doubling the number of women in uniformed components by 2020.¹⁷ The UNDPO had set specific goals for 2028, as regards the percentage share of women peacekeepers. UN military experts on mission and staff officers' targets are at 25 per cent, UNPOL at 30 per cent, and those for the contingents are at 15 per cent. While the UNPOL is near its targets, the same for contingents remains largely elusive, as the statistics at the end of Oct 2024 suggest. The data in Table 1 is only for the UNPOs with more than 9,000 uniformed personnel, as of 31 Oct 2024.

The progress in operational leadership is more visible now, though it is always tied up to the gender balance at the UN headquarters. Seven leaders at the Special Representative of the Secretary-General level also show a growing role as heads of missions (special political missions included). The glass ceiling was broken on 11 Dec 2024, when Major General Anita Asmah from Ghana took over as the first woman Head of Mission and Force Commander of the UN Disengagement Observer Force at Golan Heights.

Table 1¹⁸

Peacekeeping Missions (more than 9,000 uniformed personnel)	Total Military	Female troops	Per cent of troops	Total UNPOL	Women UNPOL	Per Cent of UNPOL	All uniformed personnel
UNMISS (South Sudan)	13,912	1,099	7.9%	1,548	424	27.3%	10.15%
MONUSCO (Congo)	10,630	880	8.3%	1,324	303	22.8%	10%
MINUSCA (Central African Republic)	13,958	1264	9%	3,014	495	16.4%	9.6%
UNIFIL (Lebanon)	9,619	803	8.3%	0	0	8.3%	8.3%

Universal growing attention to female Engagement Teams (ETs) recognises the benefits of women peacekeepers at the field level. The efficacy of women peacekeepers in community engagement was found to be better than their male counterparts but, at the same time, these peacekeepers needed protection from the military when on patrol, thus, imposing a limitation. At the UN level, senior women's protection advisers and women's protection advisers fulfil a crucial role in implementing the GBV protection mandate. The UN has also devised various mechanisms such as PoC Advisor, Gender Advisor, Gender Advisory Unit, Community Liaison Assistants, and Community Alert Network. More diverse and inclusive teams mean more effective and empathetic peacekeeping. Women peacekeepers often have greater access to communities and serve as role models, inspiring local women to participate in peace and political processes.¹⁹

Barriers to the Deployment of Women Peacekeepers

Women in UNPOs primarily face three challenges—widespread exclusion and discrimination, growing incidents of SEA by male peacekeepers, and a tendency to deploy women peacekeepers to safe locations.²⁰ Women in their home countries make up a small percentage of operational forces, thus, limiting their deployment options. The environment still carries prejudices about the physical and psychological capacity of women peacekeepers.²¹ Many social constructs view the military as 'Inherently Masculine', where characteristics associated with men (strength) make them 'Perfect'

soldiers. Female stereotypical characteristics such as compassion can be looked down upon, though highly crucial while interacting with local women. These are the societal prejudices inhibiting their deployments in many T/PCCs. As the UN Uniform Gender Strategy report identifies, military components are largely composed of combat-related capabilities, while UNPOL components are largely composed of police with public order management or other operational policing experience. These are some of the challenges women must overcome to participate in UNPOs.²²

A study on Zimbabwean women peacekeepers in Liberia and East Timor²³ brought out that despite being a key ingredient for successful operational impact in any UNPO, their contributions are not appreciated. The study confirmed a number of challenges, including language and cultural barriers, a low number of female peacekeepers, gender stereotypes, and a non-family status of most UN peacekeeping missions. Strategic and operational leadership for UNPOs needs to be gender-responsive and believe in the inclusive approach to ward off biases and discrimination in UNPOs.²⁴ There is a need to conduct gender and cultural sensitivity training, extending to military training with inclusive language. A gendered approach to training will improve not only the operational mandate itself, but also the professional capacity of a soldier, especially women soldiers who may not see value in their position as a woman in the military.²⁵

Conclusion

The Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda of the UN remains critically important for UNPOs while its implementation is transformative in field missions and is an operational necessity. The WPS framework has set two priorities—women participation in peace processes and their protection from CRSV or GBV. These forms of violence may be theoretically outside the scope of PoC, but have a significant impact on the ability and willingness of women to participate in peace and security. This is where women peacekeepers contribute immensely by creating a safe ecosystem, where the locals express their concerns fearlessly.

From the instant literature, it is deduced that the participation of women in UNPOs enables a high level of discipline among male staff in a mission, resulting in a decrease in SEA cases. By having a civilising effect, women's presence ensures a better-

behaved, less corrupt, and less abusive UN mission. Despite the challenges faced by women peacekeepers, they need to be considered as a positive addition to the UNPO agenda. To be effective, they must be included at every level, from analysis and decision-making to the leadership roles. There will be challenges and intimidations, statusquoist will always hinder this progress, but the results on the ground in various field missions indicate their overwhelming contributions. They need to be fully trained to understand the nuances of a field mission, care for the local communities, interact with all at local levels, and be considerate of the local culture. Notwithstanding certain reports of scepticism, women peacekeepers in the UNPOs remain critical to mitigate GBV in a mission area. The primary objective of the UNPOs is advancing local reforms and bringing a new perspective of hope, development, and equality. To promote reforms at local levels, the UN must be viewed as a champion of gender equality.

Endnotes

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