

# Empowering Women and Children: Pakistan Army Female Engagement Team's Vital Role in UN Peacekeeping

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\*Talat Yasmin<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the global stage has witnessed numerous conflicts that underscore the vital importance of international peace and security. Most of the violent confrontations faced by the international community during this post-Cold War era did not ascend from power dynamics among states but rather emanated from nations dealing with structural inequalities, religious or ethnic tensions, and governance shortcomings.

The United Nations (UN) utilizes peacekeeping as an effective tool to extend aid to countries navigating the complexities of transitioning from conflict to peace. As the UN Department of Peace Operations (UNDPO) outlines, peacekeeping involves creating conditions conducive to lasting peace. Within the realm of the UN, which is comprised of nation-state governments and organizations, there is a shared understanding that peacekeepers at the international level are tasked with monitoring and observing peace processes in post-conflict regions. They may also assist ex-combatants in fulfilling commitments outlined in peace agreements, offering support in various forms, including confidence-building measures, power-sharing arrangements, electoral support, reinforcement of the rule of law, and initiatives for economic and social development (Koops et al., 2015)

The UN is dedicated to sustaining global harmony, peace, and security, fostering friendly relations among nations for international cooperation. Pakistan, a member since September 1947, actively engages in UN initiatives, holding the status of a charter member and participating in specialized agencies. Notably, Pakistan stands out as one of the largest contributors of troops to UN peacekeeping missions, reflecting its steadfast commitment to international peace and security. The nation's inaugural troop deployment occurred in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in 1960, marking the beginning of a six-decade-long involvement in 46 peacekeeping missions

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<sup>1</sup> Talat Yasmin is an AFNS Officer in Pakistan Army  
E-mail: [yasmintalat2020@gmail.com](mailto:yasmintalat2020@gmail.com)

across 23 countries (Imran et al., 2023). Despite tragic losses, with 171 Pakistani peacekeepers making the ultimate sacrifice, Pakistan takes great pride in its sustained contributions (Pakistan Mission to the United Nations, 2023).

### **Role of Female Peacekeepers in Conflict Resolution**

Female peacekeepers play a crucial role in providing vital assistance in conflict and post-conflict settings, highlighting the nation's esteem for the invaluable contributions of the 'Blue Helmets' in preserving security and stability worldwide. Throughout history, women, in more significant proportion than men, have played pivotal roles on the ground in formulating conflict initiatives to implement peace agreements, necessitating their foundational involvement in the peacebuilding process (Owuor, 2021). Women exhibit adept negotiation skills in peacebuilding, demonstrating proficiency in resolving issues spanning diverse ethnic, religious, political, and cultural divides. Social science research indicates that women are more predisposed to engaging in dialogues and compromise, collaborating with communities to establish avenues for reconciliation.

Over the last two decades, UN peace operations have made notable strides in advancing the principles of gender mainstreaming and equality. Despite these advancements, there is an ongoing imperative not only to acknowledge but also to surpass the foundational objectives that underpin the integration of women in uniform within peacekeeping missions. This process requires thoroughly comprehending the barriers and unrealistic expectations women in uniform may encounter.

Achieving true gender integration involves more than the mere presence of women in peacekeeping forces; it demands a nuanced understanding of the unique challenges they face and a commitment to addressing these hurdles systematically. By delving into the impediments and impractical prospects experienced by women in uniform, the UN can develop targeted strategies and policies that facilitate their meaningful inclusion and success in peacekeeping roles.

By this notion, peacekeeping missions have expanded their mandates to encompass a broader range of activities, including peacebuilding initiatives such as organizing elections, disarming and demobilizing soldiers, security sector reform, upholding the rule of law, promoting good governance, and safeguarding human rights, there has been a parallel effort to integrate gender equality into these operations such that gender balancing and gender mainstreaming have been employed as strategies to address the complexities that arise from these expanded mandates.

The Windhoek Declaration and the Namibia Plan of Action on Mainstreaming a Gender Perspective in Multidimensional Peace Support Operations are highlighted as pivotal documents. These documents emphasized the significance of gender mainstreaming and gender balancing in UN peace operations, marking a crucial link between the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda and peacekeeping efforts (Karim, 2018).

Moreover, recognizing that gender inclusivity is an ethical imperative and enhances the overall effectiveness of peacekeeping operations, the UN must continue prioritizing efforts that foster an environment where women can thrive professionally. This involves dismantling systemic biases, providing adequate support systems, and promoting a culture of inclusivity within peacekeeping forces. Only through such

comprehensive measures can the UN truly embody its commitment to gender equality in peace operations.

### **Pakistan's Inclusive Peacekeeping and Gender Equality**

Pakistan's commitment to international cooperation and peacekeeping efforts extends beyond its active engagement in various United Nations agencies, such as UNDP, WFP, WHO, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNESCO, and IFAD. This dedication is further highlighted by Pakistan's consistent election to the UN Security Council, often in collaboration with countries like Colombia. The country's involvement in such diverse and specialized UN agencies underscores its multifaceted contributions to various global challenges.

Notably, Pakistan's commitment to peacekeeping goes beyond traditional military involvement. Female peacekeepers from Pakistan play a significant and noteworthy role in UN missions. Their contributions encompass a range of essential activities, from fostering community engagement and empowerment to addressing the specific needs of women and children in conflict zones. These female peacekeepers bring a unique perspective to the peacekeeping landscape, contributing to the establishment of sustainable peace by actively participating in conflict resolution, community building, and humanitarian efforts.

Pakistan's proactive role in peacekeeping operations is not confined to military contributions alone; it extends to fostering inclusivity and diversity within these missions. Female peacekeepers' presence and impactful contributions exemplify the country's emphasis on gender equality. Their involvement not only strengthens the overall effectiveness of UN missions but also sets a positive example for gender inclusivity in traditionally male-dominated fields.

### **Pakistan's Female Engagement Team and the Case of DRC**

To address the pressing concerns surrounding the unique challenges faced by women and children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a strategic decision was made to deploy a specialized team of well-trained female peacekeepers. This initiative, launched on 31st January 2020, marked a significant milestone as 15 Pakistani lady officers were officially recognized as Pakistan's inaugural Female Engagement Team (FET) in a UN peacekeeping mission named United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in The Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO). This deployment represents a deliberate effort to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of engagement in the DRC by leveraging these trained female peacekeepers' diverse skills and expertise.

The composition of the Pakistani female engagement team is notable for its diversity, with members assuming various roles, such as analysts, professionals, doctors, and more. Their deployment signifies a recognition of the multifaceted challenges present in the DRC and the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses the distinct needs of women and children in conflict zones. By bringing a range of specialized skills to the mission, the team aims to make a meaningful impact on the ground, contributing to the broader goals of peacekeeping operations in the region.

Following the initial deployment, an additional 17 Pakistani lady officers joined the mission on 3 February 2020, further bolstering the strength and capabilities of the female engagement team. This expanded group of skilled professionals adds depth to the mission's capacity to navigate the complexities of peacekeeping, offering a diverse range of expertise to address the multifaceted challenges present in the DRC.

It is worth noting that the commitment of Pakistani women extends beyond the field missions, as they actively contribute to various entities at the UN headquarters. This comprehensive engagement showcases the dedication of Pakistani women to playing a significant role not only in field operations but also in shaping policies and strategies at the international level. The deployment of female peacekeepers is a testament to Pakistan's commitment to fostering gender inclusivity and addressing the specific needs of women and children in conflict zones, reinforcing the country's role as a proactive contributor to global peacekeeping efforts.

Highlighting the pivotal role of female peacekeepers, Governor Theo Ngwabidje recognized the commendable service of the Female Engagement Team (FET) deployed in the DRC on January 4, 2020. Awarded UN Medals for their dedicated contributions to MONUSCO, the FET's significant impact on military and police operations was underscored. Actively engaging with local communities, the FET advocates for human rights and promotes security measures, exemplifying UN principles and contributing significantly to peace and well-being in conflict zones. The author, a member of the Pakistan Army FET selected for the UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC, emphasizes the team's commitment to spreading peace through various community engagement initiatives. They commemorate UN International Days with awareness sessions and demonstrations. The medical professionals within the team excelled in Level-1 hospitals, conducting impactful medical camps and health awareness campaigns. Despite the somber news of a fellow soldier's sacrifice, the ALMARSOOS Battalion honors his memory with a dedicated place within their army premises, fostering unity with the local community on international occasions.

Embarking on long-range patrolling (LRP) marked a distinctive and noteworthy undertaking within the operational endeavors of the FET. This novel endeavor, however, had its inherent challenges, notably the encumbrance of heavy bulletproof vests, helmets, and the carriage of MP5s, which presented significant impediments to mobility and stamina. Notwithstanding the physical exhaustion, the steadfast commitment to supporting the community persisted. Throughout this operation, the FET discerned LRP as an efficacious means to glean intelligence from female and juvenile members of the local community. Simultaneously, it comprehensively assessed their security situation and potential livelihood hazards.

Operationalizing in environments fraught with challenges and hazards, female UN peacekeepers play an indispensable role in furnishing vital assistance to vulnerable individuals entrenched in conflict zones. As integral members of the Female Engagement Team (FET), the author highlights the primary mandate of cultivating trust within the local community, with a particular emphasis on engendering open lines of communication, especially among women. During their patrolling endeavors, the concerted efforts of the FET revolve around the promotion of community well-being, gender equality, and the active involvement of women. Their interventions strategically

address specific challenges confronted by women, with timely communication of pertinent information to contingent commanders, thereby facilitating tailored solutions. The overarching objective remains to empower women and to enhance their access to indispensable resources, thereby cultivating inclusive societies conducive to overall prosperity.

### **Conclusion**

In essence, Pakistan's multifaceted engagement in international organizations and its active involvement in UN missions, coupled with the notable contributions of its female peacekeepers, underscore the country's commitment to promoting global peace, diplomacy, and the principles of the UN. This comprehensive approach solidifies Pakistan's position as a critical international diplomacy player. It reinforces its role as a significant contributor to the collective efforts to maintain peace and stability worldwide.

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