

Empowering Peace: The Impact of Women in UN Peacekeeping Missions

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Abstract

Gender balance in peacekeeping is crucial for sustainable peace and international security. Women and children are most affected by conflict, enduring displacement, sexual and gender-based violence, and limited or no access to healthcare and education. However, women remain underrepresented in peacekeeping missions, holding only a small percentage of military, police, and senior positions. This imbalance hampers peacebuilding efforts. Studies and the experience of female engagement teams show that women's involvement improves intelligence gathering, increases engagement and trust of the local population in UN peace operations, and contributes to more sustainable peace agreements. Despite this, structural underrepresentation, cultural stereotypes, inadequate facilities, and limited opportunities continue to restrict women's roles in peacekeeping. Including women in peacekeeping is not only a matter of justice but also a strategic necessity. Guided by the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda and UNSCR 1325, it emphasises that inclusive peacekeeping builds trust between UN peacekeepers and local communities, protects civilians, aids in implementing UN mandates, and supports post-conflict reconstruction.

Introduction

Conflicts and wars result in massive suffering for women and children, who bear a disproportionate burden, experiencing both immediate and long-term effects of violence. According to UNHCR Protection Cluster data, in North Kivu, a province of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) bordering Lake Kivu, 66% of the 10,000 survivors who accessed gender-based violence (GBV) services in early 2023 were victims of rape. Reports of GBV have increased sharply, from 40,000 in 2021 to 78,000 in 2022, and 123,000 in 2023. (UNHCR, 2023).

To address the challenges, alleviate suffering, and promote peace, the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda was officially established on 31 October 2000, with the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325. This landmark resolution recognized the crucial role of women in preventing conflict,

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resolving disputes, supporting peacekeeping and peacebuilding, and protecting women and children from GBV. It emphasized the importance of women's inclusion at all levels of decision-making to achieve sustainable peace (United Nations Security Council, 2000). Within this framework, the Female Engagement Team (FET) has emerged as a practical tool to access vulnerable communities, foster trust, and integrate gender perspectives into peacekeeping operations.

As Owuor (2021) observes, the mandate of the FET is to influence local populations through consistent engagement, thereby promoting stability and security. These all-female military and police units conduct interviews with victims of GBV, engage with women and girls whose voices are frequently marginalised, and support female ex-combatants in their reintegration processes. Their inclusion not only enhances operational comprehension but also fortifies the implementation of peacekeeping mandates. The United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, has similarly underscored that a greater presence of women peacekeepers improves credibility and protection for communities. Female officers, especially during patrols and at checkpoints, can interact more effectively with both men and women, often promoting less confrontational and more cooperative interactions (United Nations Department of Peace Operations, 2020). The following section discusses the prospects of women in UN Peacekeeping Missions.

The Role of Gender Inclusion in Sustaining Peace

Gender equality is essential in peacekeeping and broader security operations. Conflict impacts men and women differently, with women often facing forced displacement, sexual harassment, GBV, and limited access to vital services such as education and healthcare. Female peacekeepers create safe spaces where women and girls can voice concerns and gain support, helping peacekeeping missions to respond more effectively. Furthermore, research indicates that including women in peacekeeping missions often leads to greater longevity and stability of those missions. However, barriers such as stereotypes, limited opportunities, and unequal access to training compared with male colleagues still exist. To tackle these issues, the UN launched the Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy, which sets clear targets to increase women's participation in peacekeeping. The goal is not just to achieve numerical representation but also to ensure women occupy meaningful leadership positions (UN Women, 2025).

Enhancing Peacekeeping Effectiveness Through Female Engagement

On 12 May 2014, Major General Kristin Lund of Norway became the first woman appointed as Force Commander of the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP). Her appointment marked a milestone in the implementation of UNSCR 1325, which underscores the critical role of women in peace and security. Drawing on her experiences in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, and Liberia, contexts where cultural and social norms often limited male officers' access to communities, Lund highlighted that female peacekeepers frequently serve as the most effective bridge to local populations. In Afghanistan, 'Female Engagement Teams' succeeded in infiltrating the conservative, male-dominated society by maintaining regular interactions with local women, thereby earning their trust until they were willing to share valuable information regarding areas where the Taliban had greater influence and recruitment occurred. Similarly, in the DRC, women peacekeepers collected vital information that directly improved civilian protection and the fulfilment of mission mandates (Ivanovic, A. 2014). Therefore, female engagement facilitated the

development of greater trust with local women, thereby establishing communication channels that might have otherwise remained inaccessible. Through the elimination of gender barriers within peacekeeping frameworks, female officers have enhanced the scope, credibility, and enduring effectiveness of United Nations missions globally.

The Role of Gender Balancing in Reducing Abuse and Challenging Stereotypes

The involvement of women in peacekeeping has consistently shown positive impacts on trust-building, negotiations, and community outreach. Research shows that peace agreements with female involvement are 35% more likely to endure for at least 15 years. Increasing the proportion of women in peacekeeping by just 5% has also been linked to halving reports of abuse against civilians. While not a complete solution, this is a substantial step toward civilian protection (Security Women, 2022). Nevertheless, despite their value, women remain underrepresented: since 1992, only 6% of mediators have been women. Nevertheless, female peacekeepers are uniquely positioned to access local women in societies where gender segregation prevents interaction with male officers. This role is critical for supporting survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.

Moreover, gender diversity in peacekeeping enhances understanding of conflict's complexity, which is often rooted in history, culture, and identity. Female peacekeepers bring perspectives that improve mandate adaptation and community engagement. Their presence has also been associated with reduced misconduct, helping build healthier relationships between locals and peacekeepers. The visibility of women in blue helmets inspires young girls in conflict zones. They serve as role models of resilience, strength, and leadership, showing that opportunities, careers and a bright future exist beyond war. As Major General Bettina Patricia Boughani, Mission Police Commissioner of MINUSMA (Mali), observed that:

Having female police officers, gendarmes, and soldiers who are blue helmets helps show that women can carry out a security mission, and it shows young girls who dream of being police officers or gendarmes or soldiers that it is possible. I think that's really important. (Security Women, 2022).

Pakistan's Female Contribution: An Inspiration in Peacekeeping

Pakistan exemplifies significant female contributions to UN peacekeeping. It is one of the few countries that has the highest number of women staff officers and has also achieved the goal of deploying 15% women staff in UN missions. Despite progress in other areas, women represent only 2% of troop deployments. Nevertheless, Pakistan is committed to increasing this figure to 10%. Pakistan has achieved these milestones in very few years, setting an example and inspiring other countries (Naz, 20204).

Furthermore, Pakistan introduced its first Female Engagement Team (FET) to South Kivu in 2019. The 15-strong team offers a range of services to the region, including psychologists, stress counsellors, vocational training officers, gender advisors, doctors, nurses, operations officers, information officers, and logistics officers. An additional 17 Pakistani women officers also joined them. The FET received

notable recognition by the United Nations and was honoured with UN medals for its service in the Peacekeeping Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2020). Moreover, in recognition of female contributions in 2024, the United Nations presented the Gender Advocacy Award to two Pakistani peacekeepers, Major Sania Safdar (Cyprus) and Major Komal Masood (Central African Republic), for their leadership and commitment to promoting UN principles in peacekeeping missions. This highlights the significant potential that female peacekeepers bring to global peace efforts. Hailing from patriarchal societies, these women have excelled in their missions and have acted as active agents of peace, setting an example and inspiration for others.

Challenges for the Female Engagement Team

Despite their critical contributions, Female Engagement Teams often face significant challenges that limit their effectiveness in peace operations, such as:

Barriers to Women's Equal Participation

Institutional policies and entrenched masculine cultures continue to restrict women's opportunities in peacekeeping. For example, in 1992, the UNFIL force commander banned women from frontline roles, demonstrating how leadership decisions can exclude women from critical responsibilities. Even today, female peacekeepers are often sidelined from decision-making positions, shaped by stereotypes that either portray women as heroic exceptions or as helpless victims, both of which oversimplify their contributions (Newby, 2019).

Women in peacekeeping also remain more vulnerable to sexual exploitation, harassment, and violence. In the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), 17% of female officers identified harassment as their greatest challenge. Historically, representation has been low: between 1989 and 1993, women accounted for only 1.7% of peacekeepers; by 2001, 4%. Today, women make up just 3.87% of peacekeepers, despite evidence that missions with female participation are more effective (Pruitt, 2016).

Adding to these barriers is the tendency to relegate women to "safe" postings, excluding them from conflict zones where their presence could have the most impact. The persistence of sexual violence within peacekeeping itself further underscores these challenges. In 2019, U.S. Senator Martha McSally testified that she was raped by a senior officer while on duty, highlighting the severity of abuse within military structures (Newby, 2019).

Hypermasculine Culture in Peacekeeping

Peacekeeping environments are physically and psychologically demanding, and women often face additional scrutiny due to biological differences and perceptions of physical inadequacy. When excused from certain tasks, this can result in staffing shortages and frustrations among colleagues, reinforcing stereotypes about their capability.

Although many male officers acknowledge women's effectiveness in engaging with communities, the absence of gender-sensitivity training can undermine this potential. Misunderstandings of cultural norms can further limit effectiveness, as

in Sudan, where female peacekeepers faced hostility for wearing trousers. Such incidents underscore the importance of cultural awareness training.

Hypermasculine military culture also contributes to women being seen as outsiders. Since most peacekeepers come from infantry backgrounds, and women in many contributing states are excluded from infantry roles, they are often perceived as slowing down patrols or lacking the stamina for operational tasks. This perception restricts women's participation and fosters tokenism, leaving them isolated, confined to "gender-friendly" roles, and pressured to prove their worth.

Additionally, female peacekeepers are often expected to support survivors of GBV despite rarely receiving specialized training. While all-female units have been successful in constabulary roles, earning community trust and effectiveness, the lack of systemic support hinders broader success. This has prompted calls for the creation of a dedicated women's Peace Corps: an elite, all-female force trained both as soldiers and as community specialists, capable of addressing gendered needs while strengthening peacebuilding (Breen & Aciro, 2015).

The global landscape is marked by instances of atrocities, from ethnic cleansing to genocide, where vulnerable populations endure unimaginable horrors. If the international community does not take decisive and effective action, the world will continue to witness these violations, with lasting repercussions for generations. Now is the time to act and strengthen the framework of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) so that, as a global community, we can work together toward a future where the horrors of war and grave human rights violations are no longer tolerated or accepted as inevitable.

Conclusion

The experience of Female Engagement Teams in the DRC illustrates how women enhance the effectiveness of peacekeeping missions by building trust, improving communication, and ensuring peace lasts longer. Their presence challenges stereotypes, strengthens civilian protection, and provides role models for local women and girls. However, barriers such as limited leadership opportunities, cultural resistance, and entrenched military masculinities remain significant obstacles. To fully realize the benefits of female participation, peacekeeping missions must go beyond token inclusion. This requires implementing gender-sensitivity training, addressing harassment and abuse, and ensuring women have equal access to leadership positions and frontline responsibilities. Women's involvement in peacekeeping is not just a matter of fairness but a strategic necessity for lasting peace.

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