

ARE SOME PEACEKEEPERS MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS?

Twenty years after UNSC resolution 1325, women's participation in peace operations falls significantly short of ideals.

Both men and women have undertaken effective peacekeeping in active conflicts, yet acknowledgement has often been slanted towards the contribution of men, while failing to fully recognise the contribution of women. Last year October marked the 20th anniversary of United Nations Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women, peace and security (WPS). This landmark mechanism was the first protocol adopted by the UNSC to focus in detail on the experiences that women peacekeepers face in conflict. The resolution recognises that conflict affects women differently, and that addressing the needs, views and participation of half of humanity would provide a positive peace dividend.

Not only does UNSCR 1325 emphasise the protection of women and their meaningful participation in peace and security processes, it also acknowledges the need for women to play a greater role in preventing and resolving conflict. Currently, the UN has committed itself to 50-50 gender balance throughout the organisation, which includes the equal participation of women in all aspects of peace processes, including peace support operations (PSO). Since UNSCR 1325 was adopted, there has been increasing recognition of women's efforts to build sustainable peace. However, the importance of women's participation in PSO continues to go under-acknowledged.

Amid the diverse roles and operational functions of PSO, men and women peacekeepers form a partnership that speaks to complementary responses to challenges during conflict and the post-conflict processes defined under the African Union's 2007 Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development (PCRD) protocol. In executing tasks, women often face persistent and structural stereotyping. According to these harmful social constructions, women are perceived to be less capable within a peacekeeping environment, and are often viewed as victims who need to be protected by their male counterparts. These unspoken but underlying beliefs often affect women peacekeepers' operational efficiency, as they are viewed as caregivers and as posing a high risk of sexual vulnerability. In addition to UNSCR 1325, UNSCR 2242 similarly provides critical norms and standards on the role of women in peace and security. Adopted in 2015, UNSCR 2242 called for the operational numbers of women in military and police roles to have been doubled by 2020. Yet gender imbalance in PSO appears to persist. Since 2015, the number of employed women in peacekeeping only rose from 4.8% to 10.9%.

Research has shown that women are less likely to be deployed to missions in countries that have low levels of development, or to states that experience higher levels of violence (especially sexual and gender-based violence). In instances where personnel have been deployed to missions where security had deteriorated during peace operations, women often remain confined to bases for security reasons, while their male colleagues are free to manoeuvre and perform tasks. As these countries are logically in greater need of gender-sensitive peacekeeping, this practice is counterproductive. Greater numbers of women peacekeepers lead to more credible protection responses that meet the needs of all members of local communities. Women in patrol units are better able to reach both men and women, and a female presence at checkpoints has been credited with promoting a less confrontational atmosphere.

While no country appears to have fully addressed gender inequality in PSO, Canada launched the Elsie Initiative for Women in Peace Operations to collaborate with partners across the UN system and member states, think tanks and civil society. Launched at the 2017 UN Peacekeeping Defence Ministerial Conference in Vancouver, the project aims to develop, apply and test a combination of approaches to promote women's participation in peacekeeping. (The Elsie Baseline Report enumerates a list of barriers that hinder the deployment of uniformed women in PSO, which include a lack of information on deployment opportunities; harmful perceptions among peers and leaders; and a lack of family-friendly policies.)

There are many instances where women have however taken active roles as combatants or peacemakers. Women's effectiveness across all aspects of security was evidenced, for example, in Liberia, where the women-only police unit in the UN mission (UNMIL) demonstrated competency in riot control. Over the years, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) has advocated for gender equality through the deployment of more women in PSOs on the continent, saying their role has been critical in stabilising Somalia.

Gender equality is critical in peace operations, and women should be granted equal roles, opportunities and facilities – particularly in sensitive contexts such as Somali society, where women are able to establish ties with fellow women. Apart from building cordial relations with host communities, women also have vital information-gathering skills that are critical for the effective functioning of peace operations. The presence of women in PSO also offers several security benefits. Women are able to safeguard female members of the community in a more gender-sensitive way, and women often enjoy greater success in accessing intelligence from all members of society – which provides a more holistic appraisal of the security environment. In addition, access to women's networks enables female peacekeepers to consult with the non-elite sectors of the population who may have very different requirements for an equitable peace. This can help in developing a more representative solution at the mediation table.

While the deployment of women in PSOs has unique advantages, the dissemination of the WPS agenda should not lose sight of the broader objective of gender equality. Only by supporting and strengthening women's active participation in social, political, economic and security transformations can peace operations contribute to gender-sensitive and inclusive peace. This is the ambition expressed in UNSCR 1325 and subsequent resolutions, as well as the WPS framework that emerged from it.

Effectively increasing female representation in peace processes requires comprehensive, consultative and inclusive approaches – rather than unilateral decisions that consign women to spaces such as caregiving, support roles or providers of gender-sensitive advice. It is commendable that the UN's target for gender parity in most senior positions in peacekeeping is now 50%. It is important to remember that peace operations are also a means of advancing local reform. Championing gender equality assists in promoting reform in receiving states and their institutions. Women in PSO often act as role models in the local environment, inspiring women and girls in male-dominated societies to boost their participation in peace processes.

Despite commitments and public pronouncements about the importance of women's participation, improvement in women's numbers in PSO continues to lag. As the world is marred by increasingly complex conflicts, the need for gender parity within missions has grown and the roles of women in the strategic objectives of missions, as defined in resolution 1325 (2000), must be prioritised.

This Think Piece was written by Rumbidzaishe Matambo and published by the [Training for Peace Programme in 2021](#)
