

Moving beyond the numbers: integrating women into peacekeeping operations

By Olivera Simić

■ Executive summary

This policy brief examines the steps needed to improve women's participation in peacekeeping, highlights the problems inherent in commonly cited arguments for increasing women peacekeepers and proposes key recommendations.

In recent years some UN member states have attempted to increase the number of women in peacekeeping operations (PKOs) (including introducing all-female units) as part of an effort to mainstream gender in UN institutions, but also to challenge and transform the predominantly masculine PKO culture. However, these efforts are largely isolated and ad hoc. While all these efforts aim at increasing the number of women participants in PKOs, achieving gender balance does not automatically translate into gender equality or gender mainstreaming.

To increase the meaningful participation of women in PKOs, women need to be integrated into senior, decision-making and leadership posts; all-female contingents should be trained and deployed in, and integrated into mixed-gender environments; and deploy women who are ready to substantively change the PKO environment. Numerical targets, women's "feminine qualities" and quick fixes for addressing sexual violence in PKOs aside, policymakers should deploy women to assist in gender mainstreaming in PKOs and in changing local women's lives.

Introduction

For over two decades the United Nations (UN) has directed its efforts towards making women's participation a relevant factor in peacekeeping operations (PKOs). Although the principle has been endorsed that women should be systematically involved in PKOs, approaches to achieve this goal so far have been ad hoc and isolated. There is still a great deal to do in order to extend these efforts and ensure their implementation by all UN PKO troop-contributing countries (TCCs).

The calls for an increase in the number of women in PKOs have intensified since the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) (UNSC, 2000), which was a

major milestone in the struggle for gender equality in all aspects of peacemaking, peacekeeping and post-conflict recovery. Still, although UNSCR 1325 urges the UN secretary-general to seek to expand the role and contribution of women in PKOs, the numerical and substantial representation of women remains poor, and at senior levels is deplorable.

Among the implicit assumptions underlying these calls is that an increase in the representation of women in PKOs will lead to a decrease in the number of HIV/AIDS cases directly or indirectly linked to PKOs, a decline in the number of brothels around peacekeeping bases, and a reduction in the number of babies fathered and abandoned

by peacekeepers after their mission comes to an end. While evidence suggests that the deployment of women peacekeepers in PKOs can foster a change in male behaviour, the argument that their mere presence will alter the highly masculine environment in which PKOs occur and the mechanisms that endorse gender hierarchies is not sustainable (Valenius, 2007: 513). “Adding and stirring” does not attend to the gender power structures to which women are added, so changes are merely numerical and cosmetic rather than substantive. This is because in the context of PKOs gender continues to be seen as a woman’s issue and the idea of gender balance has become a synonym for gender mainstreaming. As a consequence, efforts to recruit more women peacekeepers have become part of a strategy to “mainstream” a gender perspective in PKOs (Jennings, 2011: 2).

To meet these and other challenges related to increasing the participation of women peacekeepers, key future activities should be to increase the number of women in senior, decision-making posts; to deploy all-female contingents in and integrate them into mixed-gender environments; and to deploy women who are ready to bring about substantive changes in the PKO environment. This policy brief highlights some of the challenges facing the calls for more women in PKOs and why the integration of women peacekeepers is integral to achieving gender equality in such operations. The gap between rhetoric and practice needs to be closed, and the assumptions behind the calls discussed above need to be rethought. Increasing the number of female peacekeepers is important, but their increased participation in PKOs will not necessarily translate into gender equality. The policy brief urges policymakers to deploy more women not only to meet numerical targets or as a quick fix to solve the sexual violence problem within PKOs, but to assist in mainstreaming gender in PKOs and to bring about change in local women’s lives.

Gender balance

The Windhoek Declaration and Namibia Plan of Action on Mainstreaming a Gender Perspective in Multidimensional Peace Support Operations (May 31st 2000) were catalysts in urging the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) to adopt more serious measures to advance gender balance at all levels of PKOs (UNGA & UNSC, 2000). They both call for the principles of gender equity and equality to be enshrined in every PKO and at all levels. According to DPKO, gender balance refers to the degree to which men and women hold the full range of positions in a society or organisation (UN DPKO, 2000: 69). DPKO has made a formal commitment to gender equality that includes a goal of achieving a 50/50 gender balance in civilian professional posts at all levels (UN DFS, 2008). As for police contingents, DPKO (2010: 27) has set a target of 20% female personnel by 2014 and has undertaken to continue working to increase the presence of women in military contingents, but without setting a specific target.

Gender equality

Gender equality implies that women and men have equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities. Ideally, gender equality should be aimed for at the same time as gender balance and gender mainstreaming, but current DPKO policies seem to focus only on gender balance. While the UN should be applauded for its efforts to increase the number of women in PKOs, this is only the first step in achieving gender equality. It seems that there is an underlying assumption that once gender balance is achieved, gender equality and the full participation of women in peacekeeping will be achieved too. However, this may not be the case. Gender balance may achieve women’s descriptive (quantitative) rather than substantial (qualitative) representation of the kind that is capable of bringing gender equality and substantive change to local women’s lives.

Gender stereotyping

While researchers mostly agree that more women are needed in PKOs to achieve gender balance, some are concerned about the reasons put forward for their deployment and whether their “feminine” presence translates into the nature of the change that women are expected to bring to PKOs. A larger number of female peacekeepers are needed in PKOs to redress gross gender inequality; however, the current UN agenda to deploy more women is contentious because it is based on two assumptions. The first is that women are innately more peaceful than men and that their mere presence and greater representation can change existing gender inequality and potentially decrease the number of sexual offences committed by their male colleagues. The second is that achieving gender balance in PKOs will promote a wider gender-mainstreaming agenda.

The call for more representation of women in PKOs tends to be essentialist in nature, based on the assumption that women are more nurturing and peaceful; i.e. they are portrayed as caring, nurturing, and empathetic and thus “different” from their male colleagues. Such notions of female peacekeepers reinforce gender stereotypes by suggesting that women are needed primarily to reduce aggressiveness and hypermasculinity rather than to share power with men and exercise their capacity and strength for protection on an equal footing with men. The call for the deployment of women peacekeepers has primarily come as a response to the UN’s damaged image and reputation following a number of reports of peacekeepers’ involvement in acts of sexual abuse (Otto, 2007). Women peacekeepers are essentially expected to take on the responsibility for preventing sexual exploitation and abuse and protecting local women from such acts. While there is a need to combat sexual violence in PKOs, the responsibility for prevention should be on TCCs, which need to exercise accountability and prosecute acts of sexual violence committed by their peacekeepers. Diverting responsibility to women does not address the problem of sexual violence in PKOs or help eradicate its causes.

All-female units

As of January 2012 the three top TCCs were Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, which contributed almost 35% of the overall military and police contingents deployed (Center on International Cooperation, 2012). The fact that the all-female (AF) peacekeeping units are coming from these countries is not surprising. In 2007 the first AF police contingent from India was deployed in Liberia. Since then, three more AF UN police units have been deployed – a Bangladeshi unit in Haiti, a Samoan unit in Timor-Leste and a Rwandan unit in Sudan. This trend has been continuing with the most recent deployment in January 2013 of a Peruvian AF contingent in Haiti. These AF units have been criticised because they are segregated from male peacekeepers, which is not in accordance with the gender mainstreaming that is at the heart of UNSCR 1325. The segregation of women rather than their integration into otherwise-male peacekeeping units might have some effect on other, mixed-gender contingents. The AF units should not be seen as a permanent solution, but rather as “temporary affirmative action” on behalf of TCCs that, once deployed, should be integrated into a mixed-gendered peacekeeping environment.

Substantive, not token presence of women

The underlying assumption is that somehow all female peacekeepers are committed to improving local women’s lives. Rather than being interested in local people and women’s issues, women (like men) may be drawn to peacekeeping by the prospects of a good salary and career advancement. According to the UN-INSTRAW survey of 2010, some of the main incentives for women joining PKOs were similar to those that drove their male colleagues – the desire to further one’s career (reported as the top reason), economic benefits, an altruistic goal of bringing peace to a war-torn society, an interest in sharing experiences and meeting colleagues from other countries, and simply the wish to work and live in an international environment (Bertolazzi, 2010: 13). None of the female peacekeepers who responded to the survey identified the desire to learn more about local women and their concerns as her motivation for joining PKOs.

The mere presence of women peacekeepers will not necessarily change gender hierarchies and the macho culture within which peacekeeping operates and may not bring the structural and institutional change that is envisaged by UNSCR 1325. The gender balancing of men

and women in PKOs does not mean that gender mainstreaming is achieved. Gender mainstreaming means changing the relationships between masculinised protectors and the feminised protected (Willett, 2010: 147). This change will come with the political commitment and concrete policies that will turn an agenda of gender balance into the meaningful participation of women in policymaking on issues that affect their lives, as well as the lives of local women. TCCs thus need to increase the number of women (and men) peacekeepers who are prepared to bring about change in local women’s lives.

Moving forward from rhetoric to action

So far there is little evidence that the gender balance strategy produces any qualitative change in the gendered relations and culture of PKOs. The gap between DPKO policies on gender balance and the realities on the ground is still very wide. Although women have gained increased access to police and military jobs in PKOs, their numbers remain low and they still struggle against gender stereotyping. Similarly, women should not be deployed because of stereotypical assumptions about their “feminine qualities”, but because of their commitment to gender issues. Research suggests that to improve the integration of women into PKOs, policymakers should:

- **improve** data collection on women’s and men’s access to opportunities to be involved in decision-making within PKOs;
- **foster** commitment at all levels – local, national and international – to increase the number of female peacekeepers in senior positions;
- **ensure** opportunities for women peacekeepers to participate in decisions about PKO policies concerning gender issues;
- **examine** the ways in which women peacekeepers contribute to the operational effectiveness of PKOs and investigate how these contributions may or may not differ from those of male peacekeepers;
- **push** TCCs to enforce the law and remove impunity for their peacekeepers for sexual crimes they commit while serving in PKOs;
- **deploy** all-female units and integrate them in mixed-gender peacekeeping environments;
- **reinforce** accountability at all levels of PKOs; and
- **increase** the number of women (and men) peacekeepers who are gender sensitive and willing to bring about change in local women’s lives.

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