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Do words matter? Women, Peace and Security and gender backlash in UN peace operations mandates

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Brief summary and recommendations

- Women, Peace and Security (WPS) language in UN peace operations mandates is affected by gender backlash and in many cases significantly changed and reduced.
- Member states and other actors supportive of WPS should use their leverage to protect core language on gender and WPS to safeguard funding of key functions in peace operations.
- Mandates should include monitoring of normative and human rights standards and holding actors accountable to ensure accountability for war crimes and human rights violations.
- As pressure on UN peace operations increases, there is a need for concerted efforts to integrate WPS in withdrawal and transition mandates.
- When mandates are reduced, member states should consider alternative ways of supporting WPS expertise and activities in missions and host countries.

How is gender backlash affecting the mandates of ongoing peace operations? In recent years, UN peace operations have faced mounting challenges and criticism. No new peace operations have been established since 2014, and member states have shown an increasing unwillingness to provide the necessary personnel and resources. Since 2025, the UN has also felt the consequences of an ongoing liquidity crisis, mainly caused by some member states (primarily the US and China) not paying their assessed contributions in full or on time.

In July 2026, the UN Secretary-General published the Review on the future of all forms of United Nations peace operations. It argues that to remain relevant, UN peace operations must undergo a significant transformation. Faced with increasingly complex conflicts, shifting international power dynamics, and financial and political constraints, UN peace operations must emphasize diplomacy and conflict prevention, cooperation with regional organizations, and clearer and more realistic mandates.

At the same time, gender backlash is manifesting in

the UN Security Council through explicit resistance to language and terminology on gender and Women, Peace and Security (WPS). This policy brief analyzes recent developments regarding the inclusion of provisions related to gender and the WPS agenda in UN peace operations mandates.

WPS language in UN peace operations mandates

Over time, references and provisions related to the WPS agenda were gradually included as standard language in the mandates of UN peace operations. Peace operations have often been mandated to consider gender as a cross-cutting issue (including through "gender-sensitive" and "gender-responsive" approaches) and, more specifically, to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence, protect women from violence and human rights abuses, and support the participation of women in political processes and institutions.

Furthermore, peace operations mandates have contained provisions focused on enabling missions to be more effective in their response, including by increasing the number of women in missions, instituting reporting mechanisms on WPS, and providing resources for gender and WPS work.

Case studies also show this tendency. For example, a study of WPS in the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) from 2010 to 2021 found that from 2013 onward, references to WPS in the mandate texts increased, with the highest number of references recorded in 2021.

In addition to a quantitative increase in WPS references, this involved a thematic expansion of WPS language in the study period. The thematic expansion reflected, on the one hand, overall trends in Security Council mandates, such as a gradual inclusion of language that encourages women's participation in conflict prevention efforts and in peace and security processes. On the other hand, it reflected the developments in the situation on the ground, including the continued emphasis on preventing and responding to violence against women.

Gender backlash affecting UN peace operations mandates

Some member states have expressed concern that mandates have become too comprehensive, with too many tasks for which there are not enough resources. At the same time, an ongoing gender backlash is contesting the liberal values and norms that the UN is tasked with upholding. According to the latest Report of the Secretary-General on WPS, only 46 percent of Council decisions contained references to gender-related issues in 2025, compared with 65 percent on average over the previous decade.

While member states such as Russia and China have always remained skeptical of incorporating extensive language on WPS and human rights in Council outcomes, the reduction in gender-related references can be traced back to a broader ideological shift and changes in US policy since 2025, including efforts to remove all policies on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and the cancellation of the Department of Defense's Women, Peace and Security program. One of the implications of this shift in US policy is that at least three permanent members of the UN Security Council are now aligned in resistance to WPS language.

As a result, negotiations regarding the renewal of several peace operations mandates have been marked by heightened contestation over language on gender and WPS. The US consistently seeks to remove terminology related to gender or to replace it with narrower wording, while also pushing for a general reduction in references and areas of responsibility.

Examples of changes in gender and WPS language

One example of changes in gender and WPS language concerns the mandate for the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), which was renewed for one year in June 2026. Compared to the 2025 mandate text which includes references to gender or women in 22 paragraphs, the 2026 mandate contains such references in only seven paragraphs. In 2025, the mandate included 22 references to gender equality, women's participation, or similar concepts; the 2026 mandate contains only one such reference. In 2025, the mandate included 12 references to "sexual and gender-based violence." In 2026, this was replaced by the term "conflict-related sexual violence," which appears only four times. In fact, the 2026 mandate does not use the word 'gender' at all, except in reference to the position "Gender Advisers." Notably, the 2026 mandate contains no references to UN Security Council Resolution 1325 or "Women, Peace and Security."

These changes are noteworthy because similar contestation over language took place in 2025. Back then, however, following coordinated efforts by other Council members during negotiations in May 2025, much of the language on gender and WPS was retained. The changes in the 2026 mandate show that countering gender backlash in the Security Council is becoming more difficult, and it is increasingly leaving its mark on the mandates of UN peace operations.

In other cases, the number of references is also reduced, but certain key functions and terminology were preserved to a larger degree. In the negotiations over the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) mandate renewal in November 2026, China, Russia, and the US opposed some of the references to gender and WPS (as well as to climate change and children and armed conflict). The final draft, however, retained many of these references.

During negotiations over the renewal of the mandate for the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) in October 2026, there was considerable discussion around several aspects of language on gender and WPS. This resulted in some compromise, such as replacing sexual and gender-based violence with references to "violence against all women, men, girls and boys." There were also instances where the original language was retained in the final draft, such as the "full, equal, meaningful and safe" participation of women in political processes.
UNMISS stands out as the most severe case, which is likely due to several factors. One is that the US is the penholder on UNMISS, meaning that it wields significant power over the final text (the UK is the penholder on UNSMIL, and France for MINUSCA). There are also other factors that affect mandate outcomes, such as a penholder or permanent member's relationship with the mission or host country, and whether members believe the mission is successful or should be closed down.

WPS during transitions and withdrawals

Given the financial and political constraints facing UN peace operations, there is a push toward planning for missions' gradual transition and eventual withdrawal. Research on WPS and UN peacekeeping transitions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Mali and Liberia shows that when missions draw down and leave, resources decline sharply, protection gaps widen significantly, and host states vary in their commitment and ability to implement existing gender policies. Research has also found that multidimensional peacekeeping operations are conducive to growing levels of women's empowerment, but such growth decreases considerably after the conclusion of the peace operation.

The removal of tasks and provisions on gender and WPS, in conjunction with reduced capacities of missions, leads to a reduction in monitoring and reporting on human rights abuses, including sexual and gender-based violence. UN reports from the transitions in Mali and the DRC already show this tendency: in Mali, the closure of the UN mission led to the dismantling of the monitoring, analysis and reporting arrangements, and in the DRC, reduced human rights monitoring capacity and logistical problems following the disengagement of MONUSCO have hindered verification in remote areas. This means that cases often go unreported, and perpetrators are not held to account.

At a time when peace operations are scaling back and increasingly preparing for transitions and withdrawal, the UN Secretary-General's latest report on WPS highlights a sharp rise in the estimated number of women and girls living within 50 kilometers of armed conflict—from 676 million in 2024 to 756 million in 2025. The research referred to above shows that when missions leave, the support and protection are not currently replaced by UN Country Teams and host states at the same level.

The importance of language

As shown above, the narrowing of peace operations mandates and reduction in references to gender and WPS is already happening. Compared with the many years of activism spent developing this language and bringing it into peace operations mandates, the reductions in WPS language are taking place at a remarkable speed. So why does language matter and why should Council members invest political capital and resources in safeguarding language on gender and WPS?

First, when something is included in the mandate, it is more likely to be included in the budget negotiations in the UN's Fifth Committee. For example, if positions for Gender Advisers or Women Protection Advisers are included in the mandate, it makes it easier to advocate for budget allocations for these positions. When budgets are shrinking and competition over resources increases, securing funding for tasks or positions that are not included in the mandate is expected to be more challenging.

Second, mandates limit the mission's scope, i.e., what it can and cannot do. One of the UN's core tasks is upholding and promoting international norms. Therefore, providing missions with mandates to monitor normative and human rights standards and holding actors accountable helps the UN fulfill its normative role.

The study of WPS in MONUSCO identified several actors beyond the mission itself as responsible for carrying out the WPS and gender provisions, including the host government, the UN Secretariat, and police- and troop-contributing countries. Consequently, some of the references or tasks related to gender equality or women's participation are intended to be addressed by actors other than the UN mission (for example, the host government). Removing these types of references does not necessarily reduce costs for the UN, but it removes

an important form of normative pressure—pressure that previously helped hold actors accountable for implementing reforms or policies to which they have already committed (for instance through national legislation).

What can be done?

The increasing resistance to gender and WPS means that Council members supportive of WPS must strategize and prepare for mandate negotiations in new ways if they want to retain WPS language.

Member states that seek to support and promote the WPS agenda should use their leverage to protect core language on gender and WPS to safeguard funding of key functions in peace operations.

Language on monitoring of normative and human rights standards and holding actors accountable contribute to strengthening the UN's normative role and to upholding accountability for war crimes and human rights violations.

Council members and other actors supportive of WPS should pay close attention when mandates are negotiated and renewed. Moving forward, it will be particularly important to promote the integration of WPS in withdrawal and transition mandates.

When mandates are reduced and language on gender and WPS is removed, member states should consider alternative ways of supporting WPS expertise and activities in missions and host countries. This could, for example, include providing funding to missions or other parts of the UN system that generate action on the ground, such as advisers or projects.

Further reading

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