



Female Peacekeepers and Operational Effectiveness in UN Peace Operations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More women are needed in UN peace operations, both on the grounds of equality and performance. March 2020 survey data and empirical evidence from the Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network (EPON) highlight the importance of greater gender parity in UN peace operations for missions to successfully achieve their mandated tasks, stressing also the impact of context-specific obstacles and how the absence of enabling and supportive systems means that neither male nor female peacekeepers can perform at their best. Survey findings also point to the risk that the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda – including gender equality in peacekeeping operations – may be treated as a second-tier concern if set against other pressing issues. In the midst of the current COVID-19 pandemic and an evolving global recession– this risk is intensified. A continued political and financial commitment to increasing numbers is a prerequisite for achieving greater gender parity and equality. However, in terms of discourse, we need to move beyond having to prove the added value of female participation, which places an extra burden on those concerned.

Twenty years have passed since the unanimous adoption of UN Security Council Resolution (SCR) 1325, which explicitly acknowledged women’s central role in contributing to peace and security (UN 2020b). In pursuit of SCR 1325 and the subsequent nine resolutions on women, peace and security (WPS)² – as well as UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on Gender Equality (UNGA 2015) – the UN and member states have invested in greater participation, protection, prevention, and gender-responsive relief and recovery in peace operations.³ In particular, there has been a focus on greater gender parity, as this is seen as having the potential to enhance the effectiveness of UN peace operations, including efforts to promote the WPS agenda (UNSC 2000, 2015; UN 2006, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2020a). Important achievements have been made (Tryggestad 2009). Several studies and policy reports have, nonetheless, emphasised the lack of evidence supporting the presumed link between female representation and effectiveness, which has contributed to normative arguments and empirical findings becoming confused (Jennings 2011; Baez and Utas 2012; Solhjell 2014; Ghittoni et al. 2018; Nagel 2019; Rupesinghe et al. 2019; Wilèn 2020). Furthermore, some argue that the current discourse on demonstrating effectiveness places additional expectations and a higher burden of proof on female peacekeepers, and should be abandoned altogether (Wilèn 2020).

In this policy brief, we seek to shed light on a two-fold question. First, what are the common assumptions and debates regarding the advantages of female participation in peace operations? Second, moving forward, which strategy will be most effective in terms of increasing numbers and promoting equality? To answer these questions, we rely on March 2020 survey data collected from military, police and civilian personnel who have served in UN peace operations, as well as from selected academic experts with particular expertise in peace operations. This is supplemented by empirical research findings from the Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network (EPON).⁴ Respondents were selected based on strategic sampling, followed by the snowball method (Bleich and Pekkanen 2013:87), which resulted in the survey being distributed to 229 people. Of these, 80 provided answers (a 35% response rate), with respondents evenly distributed between women and men.⁵

Effectiveness of peace operations

The most cited argument for increasing female participation in UN peace operations is that it boosts the overall effectiveness of a mission (Olsson and Tryggestad 2001; Bridges and Horsfalls 2009; Bertolazzi 2010; Sharland 2019; UN 2019). Central to this claim is that increased female participation may lead to better protection of civilians, especially women and children (UN 2017, 2019; Bigio and Vogelstein 2018; Sharland 2019). Female peacekeepers are also perceived as having better outreach

to local communities, thereby contributing to more effective mandate implementation (Sharland 2019) and greater understanding of conflict drivers (Ghittoni and Watson 2018). In this regard, it is claimed that in order to have a tangible effect, women should be deployed in roles involving high levels of engagement with local communities (IPI 2019a; Sharland 2019). There is growing consensus that female participation contributes to lasting peace following conflict (Simić 2013; Krause et al. 2018), which is reinforced by the literature on female participation in peace processes, which stresses that placing women in key positions – rather than merely increasing their number – is critical (Paffenholz et al. 2015; Krause et al. 2018; Council on Foreign Relations 2019). Furthermore, it is argued that female peacekeepers provide better assistance to victims of sexual violence than their male counterparts and increase the number of instances reported of sexual and gender-based abuse (Bertolazzi 2010; Puechguirbal 2010). Finally, a female presence at checkpoints has been credited with promoting a less confrontational atmosphere (UN 2019).

A second argument for increasing the number of female peacekeepers deployed is that this results in greater attention being given to gender equality in the mission itself (Dharmapuri 2013), and may also have a positive impact on gender equality in the host country by incentivising local women to engage in the political and security sectors (IPI 2019b; Sharland 2019). Supporting this argument, emerging research has shown that the presence of women's protection advisers in a UN operation correlates with a higher probability of the host country subsequently adopting a legal framework and political strategy aimed at preventing sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) (Karim and Beardsley 2017). Whether this is caused by an increase of female peacekeepers per se, or merely by the focus on SGBV in the mission, is unclear (Ghittoni and Watson 2018). In a related manner, research indicates that peace agreements signed by women contain a higher number of provisions aimed at political reform (Krause et al. 2018).

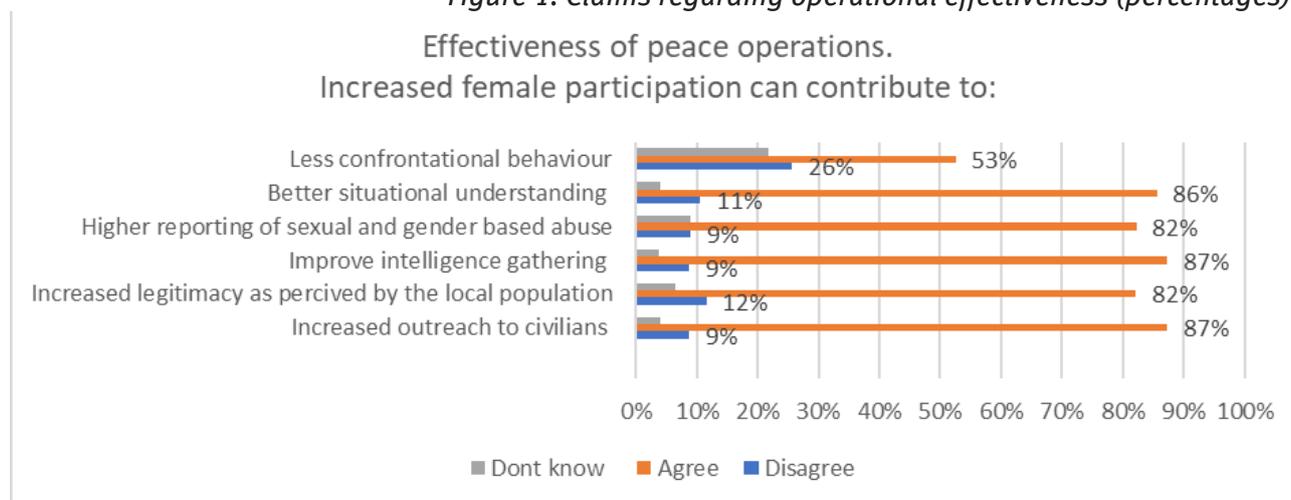
When assessing the impact of female participation in UN peace operations, a number of points should be considered. First, it is difficult to distinguish between impacts resulting from the operation itself and those that are due to external factors (Osland 2014). Even more problematic is measuring the isolated effect of female peacekeepers (Osland 2015). On average they comprise less than 5 per cent of peacekeepers (UN 2018b:3) and do not constitute one coherent element as they work across different units. Second, postulations on women's added value rely in part on assumptions of how female peacekeepers act, as well as what they aspire to achieve in conflict contexts and peacekeeping operations (Simić 2013; Fröhlich 2019). For instance, several scholars find that some female peacekeepers – as is the case with their male counterparts – join peacekeeping forces due to career and income possibilities, rather than being motivated by the goal of liberating local women in conflict (Bertolazzi 2010:13; Sion 2019). Third, Rupesighe et al. (2019) highlight that gender may not be the determining factor in operational effectiveness, pointing to findings from Heineken (2015) that show the relationship between female peacekeepers and local communities is context-specific, and often dependent on factors other than gender – such as an ability to speak the local language and respect for local culture. Fourth, absolute numbers can be misleading, as women in security forces may be serving in support positions (Solhjell 2014:12; Coomaraswamy 2015:14).

Survey findings and EPON case examples

The survey reveals overwhelming support for the WPS agenda, with 91% of respondents agreeing that SCR 1325 is important.⁶ When asked why, five themes emerged, with respondents arguing that female participation: 1) contributes to the overall effectiveness of missions; 2) may empower local women; 3) contributes to a greater focus on gender equality; 4) better reflects the host population; and 5) brings different perspectives to the mission. Moreover, several respondents emphasised that meaningful participation matters more than numbers alone, and that the agenda is important in directing efforts aimed at addressing discrimination. Despite such acknowledgements, however, several respondents stressed that the WPS agenda is often poorly operationalised; that it may become a box-checking exercise rather than addressing the specific objectives at hand; and that emphasis varies considerably between missions.

Respondents were also asked their opinion on the operational effectiveness argument. Here, a clear majority confirmed that women contribute positively to: better outreach to the local community; increased legitimacy as perceived by the local population; better intelligence gathering; higher reporting of sexual violence; and better situational understanding (for all these statements, 82–87% of respondents answered on the positive end of the scale). The same high percentage was not reflected in responses to the statement that women behave less confrontationally, with only 53% answering on the positive end of the scale.⁷ Particular emphasis was placed on the key role of female peacekeepers in community outreach, especially towards women and children in internally displaced person (IDP) camps. Interaction with the local community was highlighted as a sensitive issue, as local women are not necessarily allowed to interact with male peacekeepers.

Figure 1. Claims regarding operational effectiveness (percentages)⁸



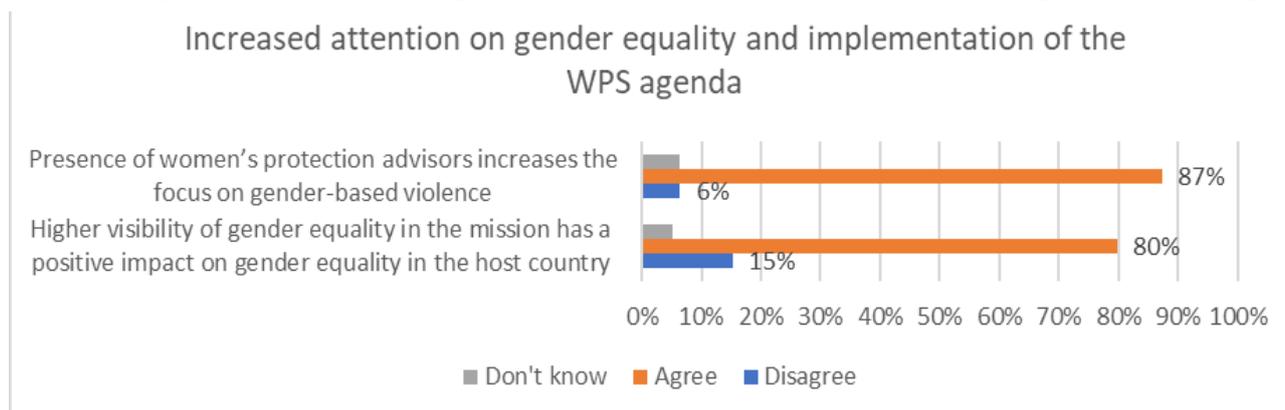
Despite these acknowledgements, important nuances can be observed. Respondents emphasised that due to contextual differences between missions, and varying levels of attention given to the recruitment of female officers and gender mainstreaming, it can be difficult to make generalised claims. Several respondents stressed that they were hindered from fulfilling their tasks due to inadequate training and follow-up systems, with some noting that once in the field they were left to their own devices. Others pointed out that arguments related to operational effectiveness assume that female peacekeepers can fulfil tasks independent of contextual differences, which is often not the case.⁹

These nuances are illustrated in several case studies undertaken within the EPON in 2018 and 2019. For instance, while the study of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) finds anecdotal evidence that female peacekeepers are more effective at gathering information from conflict-affected communities, as well as negotiating in difficult situations, the ‘added’ value of female peacekeepers may not materialise due to security risks (Day et al. 2019). Similarly, in the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the highly insecure environment creates a ‘community outreach gap’ due to the risks associated with physical engagement (van der Lijn et al. 2019).¹⁰ This underlines that the impact of peacekeepers – whether male or female – is conditioned on a number of variables, including cultural restrictions, difficulties in reaching local communities, lack of mandate provisions, under-resourced gender units, and context-specific challenges (de Coning 2019; van der Lijn et al. 2019; Novosseloff et al. 2019).¹¹

A majority of respondents (80–87%) answered on the positive end of the scale when asked if the presence of women’s protection advisers increases focus on gender-based violence, and if increased gender equality visibility in a mission has a positive impact on gender equality in the host country. Research from the EPON study of MINUSMA also points in this direction, noting that greater integration

of the WPS agenda followed initial critiques of the mission's efforts in this area (van der Lijn et al. 2019). Through its Gender Unit, in cooperation with local UN agencies, MINUSMA increased female participation in the peace process by facilitating the establishment of a separate committee composed of women. The committee helped women's groups establish their priorities for future implementation of the Algiers Agreement. The Gender Unit also supported a platform of women's groups, which were drawn from across the country, in drafting a list of recommendations to presidential candidates prior to the 2018 elections (van der Lijn et al. 2019).

Figure 2. Claims regarding promotion and implementation of the WPS agenda (percentages)



Though the focus of this policy brief is peace operations, we also included survey questions on female participation in peace processes. Despite several UN missions being mandated to support national peace processes – for example, UNMISS – there seems to be an unfortunate disconnect between peace processes and peace operations in the research literature. This was confirmed by the survey, with many respondents voicing a lack of familiarity with the role or influence that women's organisations have in peace processes prior to or during peace operation deployment. While some among those acquainted with the topic noted that women's organisations play a key role, others observed such organisations are simply not heard or are excluded from the strategic and national level. Answers were also mixed in response to the question of whether the presence of women or women's organisations in a peace process (or lack thereof) affects subsequent peace-operation work related to the WPS agenda. Exploring this point, one respondent mentioned that the focus of their mission was on the protection pillar, rather than participation. Another stated that the implementation of the WPS agenda depends on resources and individually driven initiatives, again leading to women's organisations having varying degree of involvement. The findings are supported by the EPON study of UNMISS, where inclusion of women in the peace process has been a chronic problem in the South Sudan context (Day et al. 2019).

Discussion and concluding remarks

Our respondents emphasised that the WPS agenda is regarded as important among peacekeepers and practitioners, both in terms of improving effectiveness and visibility of the WPS agenda. This highlights there is alignment between arguments in the literature and perspectives of those who have actually served in UN operations. The survey findings also stress that investing in enabling systems facilitates both women and men to perform better as peacekeepers. As pointed out by one respondent "All of these questions pre-suppose that female peacekeepers are trained and supported by enabling systems to do various things suggested. Simply deploying female peacekeepers is not enough. Their gender is not sufficient on its own, but in systems that is conducive and enabling, their gender can be an additional asset." Also noteworthy from the survey and empirical evidence is the suggestion that greater gender parity and gender mainstreaming in a mission can contribute to promoting the WPS agenda in the host country. This includes increasing the number of women in the peace negotiation process, as seen in Mali. While female participation in peace negotiation processes and in peace operations are commonly treated as two separate knowledge fields, the findings denote that – when context allows – greater

emphasis should be placed on their interconnectedness.

In focussing on the commonly prescribed arguments in favour of increasing the number of female peacekeepers, we have not emphasised the costs associated with greater gender parity. Changing recruitment strategies in order to increase the number of female peacekeepers; putting in place enabling systems for both women and men in the field; ensuring toilet facilities and gynaecologists are in place for both genders within mission units – all of these are investments that demand political backing and financial support.¹² Though, as mentioned in the introduction, we should be beyond the point of having to prove the added value of female peacekeepers, current tendencies in the international political system point towards a continued emphasis on the performance value of gender parity.

While respondents see SCR 1325 as important, only 55% said the agenda is regarded as a priority, with a mere 14% giving it the highest score on a scale of 1–6. On this point, respondents emphasised that gender equality is often seen as a second-tier issue when set against other pressing issues. The COVID-19 pandemic may exacerbate this dilemma of prioritising tasks and objectives within ongoing peace operations, including investing in increasing the number of female peacekeepers (Osland et al. 2020a).¹³

If UN peace operations are to successfully achieve their mandated tasks, gender parity should remain a high priority, both on grounds of normative equality and diversity performance. In the short-to-medium term, there is a need to preserve the achievements made thus far, and in doing so foreground the value of greater female participation in UN operations. In the long term, work must continue on removing the various barriers to female participation. Moving forward, as we argue elsewhere (Osland et al. 2020b), the focus should be shifted from having to prove the added value of female participation, to emphasising that diversity is a strength of means.

Policy recommendations for the UN and member states

In order to avoid further pushback, implement the WPS objectives not yet achieved and defend the accomplishments made.

- Deploy women in roles involving high levels of engagement with local communities.
- Context sensitivity should be taken into account when exploring the performance value of peacekeepers.
- Stress that gender parity is a means to achieve gender equality and diversity, which in turn enhances operational effectiveness.
- Make greater efforts to link peace processes and peace operations – with a strong gender focus in both.
- Move beyond the current discourse of attempting to prove the added value of female peacekeepers, as this can place unnecessary expectations on those concerned.
- Put in place a more comprehensive recruitment strategy that focuses on the diversity of skillsets needed to fulfil the mandate.

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Endnotes

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2. UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 (UNSC 2000), 1820 (UNSC 2008), 1888 (UNSC 2009a), 1889 (UNSC 2009b), 1960 (UNSC 2010), 2106 (UNSC 2013a), 2122 (UNSC 2013b), 2242 (UNSC 2015), 2467 (UNSC 2019a), and 2493 (UNSC 2019b). For an overview of other UN documents on WPS, see Security Council Report 2020b.
3. To expand on what these four WPS agenda objectives mean in this context: participation calls for women to be able to participate equally with men in peace, political and security decision-making processes at national, local, regional and international levels; protection seeks to ensure that the rights of women and girls are protected and promoted in conflict-affected situations, including protection from SGBV; prevention involves preventing all forms of violence against women and girls in conflict-affected situations, and includes fighting impunity and involving women in conflict prevention; and relief and recovery focuses on meeting the specific humanitarian needs of women and girls, as well as reinforcing women's capacities to act as leaders in relief and recovery (UN 2020b:13).
4. For further info, see: <https://effectivepeaceops.net>.
5. Two methodological caveats should be mentioned. First, the survey captures both assertions and experiences, making it challenging to distinguish between the two. Second, 31% of respondents were Norwegian, meaning it could be argued that the findings reflect a more Global North perspective.
6. A survey of Norwegian police in international peace operations from 1989 to 2016 yielded similar findings (Osland 2017), with respondents expressing that female officers get easier access to the local community, especially women, and increase the level of trust the community has in the police. Beyond arguments related to operational effectiveness, many also noted that the agenda is vital to raising awareness of gender equality and avoiding gender stereotypes.
7. The percentages for female respondents agreeing to the statements were higher than for male respondents, the exception being the statement relating to confrontational behaviour. Notably, due to small N, significant differences are difficult to detect.
8. Respondents were asked to rate the statements on a scale of 1–6, ranging from a low to a high degree of agreement. A score of 1–3 is here reported as 'disagree', while a score from 4–6 is reported as 'agree'.
9. Alchin et al. (2018) find similar tendencies in a case study of South African women peacekeepers.
10. In the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), the physical bunkerisation of the mission has also created a distance between the mission and local civilians (Williams et al. 2018).
11. These findings further support the argument that, in order to have a tangible effect, women need to be deployed in roles with high levels of local community engagement (IPI 2019a; Sharland 2019).
12. Survey respondents were asked to identify the main barriers to female participation and provide recommendations in order to increase numbers. Several stressed that conditions in the field had to be improved.
13. While it is too early to take stock of the full ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic and the inevitable global economic recession that will follow, it is likely to shape aid budgets, the UN peacekeeping budget and the priorities of member states. Added to this is the potential pushback that may arise towards value-oriented politics and global support for gender equality (Tryggestad 2020). Nationalism is on the rise in several UN member states, and the members of the Security Council have recently struggled to find common ground on the agenda. In April 2019, UN SCR 2467 on CRSV became the first WPS resolution not adopted unanimously (Taylor and Baldwin 2019; Security Council Report 2020a).

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