

# NOREF Report

## Women's participation in UN peacekeeping operations: agents of change or stranded symbols?

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### Executive summary

This report reviews the existing evidence relating to the impact of uniformed women peacekeepers – i.e. military or police – in UN peacekeeping operations (PKOs). First, it lists the arguments most commonly used to advocate for increasing women's participation in PKOs. The central focus of these arguments is that increasing the number of women in a PKO will improve the operational effectiveness of the mission. Thus, the dominant form of argumentation is instrumentalist: deploying more women peacekeepers is seen as necessary to achieve a more successful mission, and not as an end in itself. There then follows a closer examination of these arguments, focusing on (i) the available evidence for these claims, and (ii) the assumptions underlying them. The report contends that many of the claims justifying women's increased participation in PKOs are at present inflated – unsurprisingly so, given the still extremely small presence

of uniformed women personnel in these missions – and are based on “affirmative gender essentialisms”. Finally, there is a brief discussion of whether the current attempts to increase women's participation in PKOs amount to “selling” gender or selling it out. The report concludes that more systematic research is needed to examine the ways in which women peacekeepers contribute to the operational effectiveness of peacekeeping missions, and how these contributions differ (or not) from the performance of male peacekeepers. It recommends financial and logistical support for mentoring programmes, both within troop-contributing countries that send all-women or mixed units into the field (so that returning women peacekeepers' experiences are properly utilised), and between troop-contributing countries, with South–South cooperation and mentoring a particular priority.

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## Introduction

Increasing women's participation in peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding has been an important goal for UN peacekeeping since the passage in 2000 of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women, peace and security. "Gendering" national security institutions – e.g. national militaries and police services – has similarly been emphasised in both developed and developing countries. On both the UN peacekeeping and national levels, "gendering" security forces and institutions typically includes attempts to recruit more women soldiers and police officers, either as a stand-alone effort or as part of an overall strategy to "mainstream" a gendered perspective. In many of these environments, "gender" still translates as "women".

This report<sup>2</sup> reviews the existing evidence relating to the impact of uniformed women peacekeepers – i.e. military or police – in UN peacekeeping operations (PKOs).<sup>3</sup> While it focuses only on PKOs rather than national militaries or police services, many of the issues raised here are relevant to these cases. The report proceeds in the following order. First, it lists the arguments most commonly used to advocate for increasing women's participation in PKOs. A key thread running through these arguments is that increasing the number of women in a PKO will improve the operational effectiveness of the mission. In other words, the dominant form of argumentation is instrumentalist: deploying more women peacekeepers is seen as necessary to achieve

a more successful mission and not as an end in itself. There then follows a closer examination of these arguments, focusing on (i) the available evidence for these claims, and (ii) the assumptions underlying them. Here I contend that many of the claims connected to women's increased participation in PKOs are at present inflated – unsurprisingly so, given the still extremely small presence of uniformed women personnel in these missions – and based on "affirmative gender essentialisms".<sup>4</sup> Finally, there is a brief discussion of whether the current attempts to increase women's participation in PKOs amounts to "selling" gender, or selling it out. This discussion is placed in the context of a larger debate in feminist circles as to the most effective ways to advance gender equality; it is a debate on both tactics and principles, and is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon. The report closes with some concise concluding remarks.

## Why more women in peacekeeping operations? The operational-effectiveness argument

As noted above, increasing women's participation in PKOs (or national security services) is often considered to be one – perhaps the most crucial – component of a larger effort to mainstream gender in these institutions. Yet a clarification is in order. As set out at the 1995 Beijing conference and in subsequent documents, gender mainstreaming actually has little to do with simply recruiting women to existing institutions – a policy that many feminists dismissively characterise as "add women and stir". Instead, gender mainstreaming is an attempt to institutionalise gendered approaches in the design and implementation of legislation and policy. Conversely, UNSCR 1325 specifically links increases in women's participation in peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding – and within member states' peace and security institutions<sup>5</sup> – to improvements in women's situations in conflict and

2 An earlier version of this report was presented at a workshop on Gender and Security Sector Reform in Post-conflict Societies in Africa: Challenges, Opportunities and Lessons Learned organised by the Nordic Africa Institute and the Swedish National Defence College, Stockholm, December 6th-7th 2010.

3 The initial intent was also to include women civilian peacekeepers as part of the analysis. Women currently comprise approximately 30% of civilian UN personnel in PKOs globally, as opposed to 3% of military peacekeepers and 9% of police personnel (see <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/issues/women/womeninpk.shtml>). However, the issue of women as civilian peacekeeping personnel is virtually unproblematised: while there is some literature relating to the development of a gender infrastructure within the UN system (e.g. gender advisers, gender units), there is very little on the question of women as civilian actors within the UN peacekeeping system. An exception is a report from Women in International Security, which focuses particularly on women in leadership positions in peace operations. See WIIS (Women in International Security), *Women in United Nations Peace Operations Report*, Washington, DC, WIIS, 2008.

4 Elissa Helms, "Women as agents of ethnic reconciliation? Women's NGOs and international intervention in postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina", *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol 26, no. 1, 2003, p 16.

5 The exact passage is that the resolution "[u]rges Member States to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict". See UN Security Council Resolution 1325, 31 October 2000, S/RES/1325 (2000), [http://www.un.org/events/res\\_1325e.pdf](http://www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf).

post-conflict environments. According to UNSCR 1325, appointing or recruiting more women leaders, decision-makers, military or police officers, and foot soldiers is a means of better protecting the safety and rights of women and girls; furthermore, ensuring women's participation at all levels is linked to the "maintenance and promotion of international peace and security".

UNSCR 1325 has situated women's interests, experiences, and challenges squarely within the peace and security agenda. It has been crucial in raising the visibility and importance of "gender issues" in UN peacekeeping, and has helped normalise the idea that women's equitable involvement in peace processes and, more generally, in the political and economic life of their society is vital to a sustainable peace. Nonetheless, UNSCR 1325's focus on women (rather than gender), and representation and participation (rather than types of approaches) makes it susceptible to the "add women and stir" mindset. Thus, as already mentioned, many UNSCR 1325 national action plans have (at least initially) focused in part on increasing the number of women in the armed forces, mediation teams, etc. of the countries concerned; and the UN's peacekeeping apparatus has followed suit, albeit within the recruitment constraints with which the UN must operate.<sup>6</sup> For example, the UN has set a target of 20% women police officers in the UN Police by 2014, while encouraging troop-contributing countries to include more women soldiers in their sending forces. These efforts notwithstanding, the level of uniformed women peacekeepers remains small, with women today constituting 3% of military peacekeepers and 9% of UN Police officers.

In the grey and academic literature advocating for increased women's participation in peacekeeping, a

number of arguments tend to recur.<sup>7</sup> These overlap and reinforce each other, but some overarching themes can be identified. They include the following:

- **Protection:** PKOs with more women peacekeepers are better able to protect citizens, especially women and children, because women peacekeepers bring a greater awareness of and sensitivity to their particular needs and challenges, and because women peacekeepers are less intimidating or provocative than men peacekeepers.
- **Sexual violence (1) – assistance to victims:** women peacekeepers ensure a more compassionate or empathetic response to victimised women and children, especially those that have been sexually assaulted; it is often claimed that it is "easier" for a raped woman to talk to another woman about her assault.
- **Sexual violence (2) – deterrence:** by having a "civilising" effect on their male colleagues, women's presence ensures a better-behaved, less-corrupt and less-abusive PKO.
- **Sexual violence (3) – incidence:** with regard to the problem of sexual exploitation or abuse committed by UN personnel, women are less likely to be perpetrators, thus lowering the overall level of sexual exploitation or abuse committed;
- **Practical advantages:** women peacekeepers are able to search local women at checkpoints; can

<sup>6</sup> The UN can request, but cannot mandate, more women military peacekeepers, as the composition of the military force supplied to peacekeeping forces is ultimately at the discretion of the troop-contributing country. The institution has somewhat more discretion over the gender balance of military observers, UN Police and civilian staff.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Francesco Bertolazzi, *Women with a Blue Helmet: The Integration of Women and Gender Issues in UN Peacekeeping Missions*, UN-INSTRAW Working Paper Series, Dominican Republic, 2010; UN DPKO (Department of Peacekeeping Operations), *Gender Resource Package for Peacekeeping Operations*, New York, DKPO, 2004; UN DPKO (Department of Peacekeeping Operations), *Mainstreaming a Gender Perspective in Multidimensional Peace Operations*, New York, DPKO, 2000; UNIFEM (UN Development Fund for Women), *Gender-sensitive Police Reform in Post-conflict Societies*, UNIFEM, 2007; Kristen Cordell, *Gender-related Best Practices in Peacekeeping Operations in Liberia: 2003-2009*, mimeo, 2009; Donna Bridges and Debbie Horsfall, "Increasing operational effectiveness in UN peacekeeping: toward a gender-balanced force", *Armed Forces & Society*, vol 36, no. 1, 2009, pp 120-130; Louise Olsson and Torunn L. Tryggstad, "Introduction", Louise Olsson and Torunn L. Tryggstad, eds, *Women and International Peacekeeping*, London, Frank Cass, 2001.

establish better relations with local women's groups; and can improve intelligence gathering about the local community, via better access to local women and/or a broader understanding of what constitutes a security threat.

- **Inspiration:** women peacekeepers help contribute to more equitable gender relations within the local society by serving as role models or mentors for local women and girls.

The sum of these various arguments is that the presence of women peacekeepers contributes to a more *effective* PKO, owing to the abovementioned talents, attributes or practical advantages. Additionally, increasing women's participation in PKOs is considered to have both endogenous and exogenous effects. Endogenous effects are felt within the PKO in question: women's presence makes for a more compassionate, empathetic and better-behaved operation. Exogenous effects occur on the level of the host community and include women peacekeepers acting as role models, improving local gender relations, and bettering the protective and response capacity of the mission.

Advocates of increasing women's participation may also make arguments from principle – for example, by pointing out that having more women peacekeepers contributes to the goal of a gender-equal, more-representative peacekeeping mission, where gender equality and representativeness are seen as ends in themselves. However, it is notable that these kinds of rights-based arguments are increasingly marginalised in the literature, rhetoric and institutional strategy relating to women peacekeepers<sup>8</sup> in favour of the instrumentalist argument stressing women's positive impact on operational effectiveness.<sup>9</sup> This

8 By institutional strategy, I am referring to the work of gender advisers, gender units and gender-related training conducted by UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) trainers or by outside groups endorsed by DPKO. This is not always a coordinated strategy, but rather a coalescing of norms, tactics and evolving best practices. "Literature" and "rhetoric" refer to UN documents relating to gender and peacekeeping and/or UNSCR 1325 and other relevant resolutions, as well as statements made by UN officials. The operational-effectiveness argument is also made in non-UN literature as well; see, for example, Bridges and Horsfall, "Increasing operational effectiveness in UN peacekeeping", 2009.

9 Ulrike Baumgärtner, "Learning to speak a 'masculine' language: rationalization of gender equality in the United Nations peacekeeping bureaucracy", paper presented at the International Studies Association Annual Conference, New Orleans, 2010.

is an instrumentalist argument insofar as the "real goal" behind recruiting more women in uniform (presumably gender equality) is supplanted by a more palatable alternative claim (adding women makes existing institutions work better, without threatening the latter's core functions or identity).

It is, of course, possible that the real goal is not about gender equality at all, but only concerns improving the functioning and effectiveness of PKOs, militaries and police; in this case, the argument would no longer be instrumentalist, but it would not necessarily be feminist either. It seems unlikely that operational effectiveness is the only objective, given the fact that it is gender advisers, gender units and feminists/women's groups – and not generals or police chiefs – doing the bulk of the advocating for implementing UNSCR 1325. Nevertheless, it may be the case that those most engaged in advocating for UNSCR 1325, especially within the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations system, are unsympathetic to distinctions between rights-based and instrumentalist arguments.<sup>10</sup> For example, Baumgärtner notes that headquarters-based UN gender advisers are generally not socialised in the women's movement, nor do they identify themselves as part of it.<sup>11</sup> The transformational and subversive quality associated with feminist notions of gender equality may therefore be seen as old-fashioned or may not be central to their world view.

Regardless, the inescapable conclusion is that an argument based on rights or principles has been deemed insufficiently convincing when it comes to uniformed personnel. Instead, the prevailing argument for women's inclusion is that (i) women bring something to PKOs that men do not, and (ii) this contributes to more effective operations. Above I have attempted to specify, on the basis of the existing literature, what it is that women (are argued to) bring to PKOs. However, women's "value-added" is not always specified so precisely. This is evidenced by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon's statement to a meeting on increasing women's participation in policing: "Gender parity is as important here [in

10 This point will be developed further in the section entitled "Selling gender, or selling it out?", below.

11 Baumgärtner, "Learning to speak a 'masculine' language", 2010, p 22.



policing] as it is across our agenda. It is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end: greater efficiency, greater effectiveness. By empowering women within the United Nations we are not just upholding the principles for which we stand. We are making ourselves a better Organization".<sup>12</sup>

An interesting consequence of reliance on the operational-effectiveness argument is that its advocates can become nervous about attempts to test its claims. To some degree, this is understandable: at present the number of women uniformed peacekeepers is so low and the official reform movement itself is so recent that – despite some interesting and critical work being done on the issue – unambiguous or robust evidence of the benefit of women peacekeepers is hard to come by. Yet it would be disingenuous to leap to the conclusion that women's participation brings no benefits. The current thinness of evidence does not preclude the existence of ample evidence of effectiveness in the future.

That said, in the current climate of constant impact evaluations and results-based management practices, the wariness about submitting the operational-effectiveness argument to scrutiny is problematic. This is because arguing about (purportedly) neutral, technocratic goals like operational effectiveness means showing that *what you propose actually makes the operation more effective*. Unwillingness to engage in a critical or assessment-oriented conversation is thus problematic for advocates of the operational-effectiveness approach. But the real risk for those who support women's participation is that they open themselves up to attack should the evidence not eventually weigh clearly in their favour. Using the operational-effectiveness argument as the primary justification could thus end up leading to indifference or, worse, outright rejection and backlash. In this respect, the rights-based argument – which essentially contends that women's participation should be a given without the need for additional justifications, and which thus appears to many to be a less-convincing case – is impervious. One can *disagree* with the contention that gender equality and representativeness are ends in and of themselves, but one cannot *disprove* it. The crucial distinction is that rights-based arguments bring politics in, while the operational-effectiveness

argument attempts to keep politics out. The first tactic accepts the normativity of gender-related reform, while the latter attempts to obscure it.

### **Analysing the argument: current evidence and the problem of impact**

So what is the evidence regarding the impact of women peacekeepers? At this relatively early stage, much of it is anecdotal and ad hoc. It is also to a large degree based on the assessments of women peacekeepers themselves, or those of their male colleagues or commanding officers. This is not to de-emphasise the importance of the work being done, but merely to note the limitations of the existing evidence base.

There is some indication that women peacekeepers take a different approach to uniformed peacekeeping tasks than men in some of the ways featured in the arguments previously listed. Examples found in the literature – again, primarily sourced from women peacekeepers themselves – include women peacekeepers befriending and assisting local women, whether on an informal, individual basis or through more formalised contacts with women's groups; women peacekeepers organising toy giveaways, school construction or clean-ups and other outreach activities for local communities; and women peacekeepers helping to de-escalate tensions that had arisen between their male colleagues and locals, or providing solace to distressed local women.<sup>13</sup> Such efforts are generally presented as generating goodwill within the affected community or group and/or preventing potential problems in the peacekeeper–local relationship from arising.

Conversely, there is thus far little evidence bearing out the various arguments related to sexual violence (victims' assistance, deterrence or incidence). In

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Bridges and Horsfall, "Increasing operational effectiveness", 2009; Bertolazzi, *Women with a Blue Helmet*, 2010; Cordell, *Gender-related Best Practices*, 2009; Elise F. Barth, "The United Nations Mission in Eritrea/Ethiopia – gender(ed) effects", Louise Olsson, Inger Skjelsbæk, Elise F. Barth and Karen Hostens, eds, *Gender Aspects of Conflict Interventions: Intended and Unintended Consequences*, Oslo, PRIO, 2004; Johanna Valenius, "A few kind women: gender essentialism and Nordic peacekeeping operations", *International Peacekeeping*, vol 14, no. 4, 2007, pp 510-523. For a conflicting view, see Liora Sion, "Peacekeeping and the gender regime: Dutch female peacekeepers in Bosnia and Kosovo", *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, vol 37, no. 5, 2008, pp 561-585.

<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2010/sgsm12935.doc.htm>

particular, the deterrence argument – that women peacekeepers will have a “civilising” effect on men peacekeepers, thus reducing the prevalence of prostitution, sexual exploitation or abuse in the mission area – is found wanting.<sup>14</sup> Instead, it seems that women peacekeepers tend to adapt their own behaviour to that of the majority group, i.e. men. In order to be accepted by their male colleagues, they become “one of the boys” – at least tolerating, if not actively participating in, crude banter and highly-sexualised behaviour. Alternatively, some women take the opposite approach by self-segregating, abstaining from group activities where they suspect the men will be seeking out women or misbehaving, but not actively doing anything to stop it. The reluctance of women peacekeepers to act as their male colleagues’ keepers will be further examined in the next section.

Meanwhile, the other two aspects of the sexual-violence argument (concerning improved assistance to victims and decreased incidence) have received scant scrutiny, as has the argument that women peacekeepers serve as role models to local women. The assertion that women peacekeepers’ presence is comforting to women victims of sexual violence is extremely difficult to assess, which has not prevented it from becoming a truism. This is despite the fact that, as some researchers have described, locals are just as likely to “see the uniform” as they are to “see the gender”; and moreover, that women peacekeepers themselves may be no more equipped, nor more willing, than their male counterparts to comfort and counsel victims of sexual violence.<sup>15</sup> These points, too, will be revisited in the next section.

As noted above, it is unwise at this point to draw firm conclusions on the impact of women peacekeepers. This is especially so given that the

small percentage of women peacekeepers can be further categorised into women in a position to come into contact with locals and women whose work assignments essentially keep them confined to their base or compound. The latter include medical staff (who may tend to some locals, depending on the policy of their battalion, but often only treat other UN personnel), administrative staff and other support staff. In some units or battalions, all or most of the women present rarely interact with anyone other than their fellow peacekeepers. This clearly limits the opportunity for these women to achieve any exogenous impact. Yet it is worth noting that even women in jobs that take them outside the base often have very limited or superficial contact with locals.<sup>16</sup> This situation is not unique to women peacekeepers; instead, segregation between peacekeepers (especially military peacekeepers) and locals is increasingly characteristic of UN peacekeeping missions.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, it implies that even significantly increasing the number of women peacekeepers may not dramatically change the way the mission looks or feels to local residents. If peacekeepers as a group keep themselves at arm’s length from locals, then the gender composition of these distant peacekeepers may not be particularly important. Furthermore, if the mission policy (or battalion or unit policy) limits the opportunity for contact between peacekeepers and locals, then it is unrealistic to expect individual women peacekeepers to buck this trend.

These sorts of countervailing pressures demonstrate how fraught the issue of impact can be. Even if the claims made on behalf of women peacekeepers are correct, they may not bear fruit unless the prevailing mode of doing peacekeeping changes (in which case, how will we know they are correct?). But as previously argued, so long as the operational-effectiveness argument is dominant, the issue of evidence must be addressed. If one contends that women peacekeepers improve operational effectiveness, how is that claim verified? Is it

14 See, for example, Valenius, “A few kind women”, 2007; Barth, “The United Nations Mission”, 2004; Sion, “Peacekeeping and the gender regime”, 2008; Kathleen M. Jennings, *Protecting Whom? Approaches to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in UN Peacekeeping Operations*, Oslo, Fafo, 2008; Olivera Simic, “Does the presence of women really matter? Towards combating male sexual violence in peacekeeping operations”, *International Peacekeeping*, vol 17, no. 2, 2010, pp 188-199.

15 On “seeing the uniform”, see Simic, “Does the presence of women really matter?”, 2010; Barth, “The United Nations Mission”, 2004; on women peacekeepers’ potential uneasiness with local women, see Jennings, *Protecting Whom?*, 2008; Marsha Henry, “Peacexploitation? Interrogating labor hierarchies and global sisterhood amongst Indian and Uruguayan female peacekeepers”, *Globalizations*, forthcoming.

16 See, for example, Henry, “Peacexploitation”, forthcoming; Barth, “The United Nations Mission”, 2004.

17 Mark Duffield, “Risk-management and the fortified aid compound: everyday life in post-interventionary society”, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, vol 4, no. 4, 2010, pp 453-474. Jennings (*Protecting Whom?*, 2008) also discusses how peacekeeper training on the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse seems designed to discourage peacekeepers from making casual or unmediated contact with locals.

enough to point to individual success stories, at least at this stage? Or should there be more systematic results? Should the impact of women peacekeepers only be studied in the areas where they are expected to contribute the most – e.g. in terms of contact with local women and on sexual-violence issues – or should there be an overall improvement in mission or unit effectiveness, however this is determined?

Assessing the impact of issues as political and sprawling as gender and peacekeeping is a difficult, complex and controversial task. The way one approaches it depends on how the mission mandate and “effectiveness” are defined, which in turn reflects the agenda, interests and institutional affiliation of those doing the defining. One way of sidestepping these debates is to set numerical targets or quotas for women’s participation, where the quotas themselves serve as proxy for impact. But as feminist critics of “add women and stir” approaches have been arguing for decades, numerical targets do not say anything about impact, whether endogenous or exogenous. All they say is that more (or fewer) women have been deployed in PKOs, without saying anything about the implications of their presence. It does not follow that simply increasing the number of women in the uniformed peacekeeping force will *necessarily* increase their influence within the operation or change the way the mission operates in relation to local citizens. These are simply assumptions, which will be unpacked in the following section.

Yet as more women peacekeepers are deployed – and especially as more all-women units are deployed, such as the Indian Formed Police Unit (FPU) in Liberia or the Bangladeshi FPU in Haiti – there are greater opportunities for more systematic research. One method could be by conducting in-depth studies of all-women or mixed units, focusing particularly on local perceptions (as determined by survey data, focus groups and qualitative interviewing) in addition to the perceptions of the peacekeepers themselves. Where relevant data is available, one could also attempt to discern whether the presence of all-women or mixed units has a demonstrated impact on particular indicators, such as street crime, sexual violence, etc. – albeit with the caveat that causality is difficult to establish.

## **Analysing the argument, part 2: the woman peacekeeper and “affirmative gender essentialisms”**

The question of impact relates to the PKO or the local population, or both. That is, the subject of study is not women peacekeepers per se, but the effect that they have on the functioning of a mission and/or the welfare of local residents. However, it is also interesting to examine what the arguments in favour of women peacekeepers seem to assume about women as a group. How are women constructed by the operational-effectiveness argument?<sup>18</sup>

Strikingly, the image that appears is far from progressive. Much of the argumentation hinges on the assertion, whether implicit or explicit, that it is not what women *do*, but who they *are* that makes the difference. Or, more precisely: the way women “do” peacekeeping is inseparable from the way women peacekeepers “are”, which is to say, noticeably different from “normal” (men) peacekeepers. Women are more compassionate and empathetic than men – thus making them better able to bond with local women, or comfort victims of sexual violence, or notice disturbances in the community that men would be oblivious of. Women are less sexually driven than men, or at least better able to control their sexual drive, thus making them less likely to sexually exploit locals. They are also no-nonsense disciplinarians, which is why their presence shames or tames their male colleagues, keeping them from sexual misbehaviour. Women have better interpersonal skills – they connect better than men – thus enabling them to be mentors to other women and also to defuse situations that men ignite. Women are simply less threatening than men, even when highly trained, wearing a uniform and carrying a weapon. Indeed, this lack of overt menace makes them model peacekeepers.<sup>19</sup> Cumulatively, the traits that seem to underpin the ideal-type woman peacekeeper – compassion, empathy, asexualised,

<sup>18</sup> Here I focus on the operational-effectiveness argument, since it is the most prevalent, and since the arguments used to construct it are the most loaded with assumptions.

<sup>19</sup> This is essentially DeGroot’s argument, although he seems to want it both ways: on the one hand, he argues that since these stereotypes exist, they might as well be leveraged to the benefit of women’s participation, while on the other hand, he is somewhat critical of, but does not dismiss, the stereotypes themselves. See Gerard DeGroot, “A few good women: gender stereotypes, the military and peacekeeping”, Louise Olsson and Torunn L. Tryggstad, eds, *Women and International Peacekeeping*, London, Frank Cass, 2001, pp 23-38.

disciplined and disciplining, connector, consensus-seeker – are also often associated with that most typical of womanly acts, mothering.

That these claims reinforce some traditional stereotypes of women does not mean that they are necessarily misguided or harmful. In the context of the operational-effectiveness argument, they are employed in order to assert a positive message about women's capabilities and resourcefulness. Some women peacekeepers themselves point to these qualities when discussing what they bring to their job, often (perhaps paradoxically) at the same time emphasising their professionalism and training.<sup>20</sup> Helms refers to these types of tropes as “affirmative gender essentialisms”.<sup>21</sup> This captures the fact that, while the constitutive qualities may be generally positive, they nonetheless dismiss women's diverse capabilities, experiences and interests in favour of a particular ideal based on the “essential” character of womanhood. That these essentialisms are flattering does not make them less patronising or otherwise unproblematic. For example, the affirmative essentialist ideal overlooks the possibility that women are attracted to careers in the military or police for the same pragmatic reasons as many men – e.g. for a stable job, a relatively-decent salary, the opportunity to challenge themselves, etc. – and, by extension, are interested in participating in PKOs not primarily to help other women, but rather to improve their own career prospects or increase their earning potential. Indeed, it may be that ambitious women would specifically prefer not to work on “women's issues” in PKOs, for fear of being ghettoised and barred from (what are perceived as) more prestigious positions. Moreover, and perhaps especially in the military, it is often the case that women soldiers and officers are the *least* convinced of their ability to enact change beyond their immediate work environment, and sometimes not even there.<sup>22</sup> This is likely a realistic response for women working in institutions that remain not just men-dominated, but extremely masculinist in orientation, ideology and functioning.

20 See, for example, Henry, “Peacexploitation”, forthcoming; Barth, “The United Nations Mission”, 2004.

21 Helms, “Women as agents”, 2003, p 16.

22 See, for example, DeGroot, “A few good women”, 2001; WIIS (Women in International Security), *Progress Report on Women in Peace & Security Careers: U.S. Executive Branch*, Washington, DC, WIIS, 2010.

Yet such a response from women “inside the system” illustrates how large a burden of responsibility the operational-effectiveness argument puts on the shoulders of women peacekeepers, who by their very presence are supposed to make the mission better. There are two related issues here. One is the feasibility of genuine change occurring when there are still so few women in the system, whether as foot soldiers, police officers, or at the managerial or leadership levels. This is especially pressing when one considers the effort that militaries in particular put into socialising new soldiers. Arguably, the whole point behind the training processes for new recruits (non-officers) is to initiate them into a new life in which the individual is subordinate to the collective and the individual's preferences are routinely overridden by his/her commanding officer. Why should we expect that, in the case of women soldiers, the system will adapt to them rather than that they will adapt to the system? Additionally, are women expected to be uniquely resistant to the dominant masculinities ingrained in military (or peacekeeping) service? From an operational-effectiveness perspective, the answer seems to be “yes”, since much of the argument is built on affirmative gender essentialisms that (it must be assumed) are unaffected by training and deployment. But this is a dubious proposition.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the opposite reaction seems more plausible: that women recruits will “estrangle themselves from ‘femininity’ as it is portrayed by the army and mock other women who are viewed as stereotypical females”.<sup>24</sup> Such strategies will likely continue unless the institution itself is “regendered”.<sup>25</sup>

The second issue is the unfairness of designating women as the only change agents – that is, putting the onus of responsibility on women (some of whom have little desire to “fly the flag” for their fellow women), rather than on the men that still dominate and largely populate the institution of UN uniformed peacekeeping. Here the expectation that women

23 For more on masculinities and military training (with specific reference to peacekeeping), see Sandra Whitworth, *Men, Militarism and UN Peacekeeping: A Gendered Analysis*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 2004, ch. 6.

24 Sion, “Peacekeeping and the gender regime”, 2008, p 580.

25 On “regendered armies”, see Cynthia Cockburn and Meliha Hubic, “Gender and the peacekeeping military: a view from Bosnian women's organizations”, Cynthia Cockburn and Dubravka Zarkov, eds, *The Postwar Moment: Militarities, Masculinities and International Peacekeeping*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 2002, pp 116-119.



peacekeepers will “civilise” their male colleagues’ sexual behaviour is illustrative. A consistent finding in the literature is that women peacekeepers have no interest in being “sex police”.<sup>26</sup> Women do not want to interfere in their colleagues’ private lives any more than men do; besides feeling that it is none of their business, most women do not want to be seen as hectoring, judgemental or disloyal. The bigger issue is that, if the way that peacekeepers behave while deployed is a problem, then accountability must be levied through the institution and its command system: it is not the task of women alone. As regards sexual activities, this is not simply a matter of setting new rules and policies; it may involve changing the culture of the institution itself, especially where that culture is highly gendered and sexualised.<sup>27</sup> This sort of transformation will not organically occur with the addition of women to the ranks. But without such a transformation, it is unfair to expect women to be the kind of change agents anticipated by the operational-effectiveness argument – even if they wanted to be. Rather than agents of change, they may end up being stranded symbols.

A couple of other points are worth mentioning. One relates specifically to the assumption that women peacekeepers will have a better relationship with the local population, perhaps even serving as mentors to other women and girls. This expectation exists despite the formidable linguistic and cultural differences that tend to exist between peacekeepers and locals – differences that one could expect to impact on peacekeepers’ ability to communicate with and understand the specific needs of local women.<sup>28</sup> Cynically, one could say that there seems to be the expectation that the simple act of being a woman will transcend the economic, cultural, linguistic, and possibly religious, racial or ethnic differences and foster open communication based on

a kind of shared global sisterhood.<sup>29</sup> The final point is that shifting the burden of change onto women lets men off the hook, making even more unlikely the kind of transformational change mentioned above. If compassion, empathy and sensitivity to the local population are important to the functioning of the PKO, then why can’t men be compassionate, empathetic and sensitive? Why are these seen as attributes that must be brought in, intact, by women?

### **Selling gender, or selling it out?**

The above criticisms of the operational-effectiveness argument – that it instrumentalises gender equality, depends on evidence of impact that may be difficult to establish and is based on affirmative gender essentialisms – have provoked wariness from some feminists.<sup>30</sup> Their concern is that an argument for women’s participation that depends on common stereotypes of women, while avoiding serious interrogation of the prevailing gender regimes (i.e. dominant masculinities) within uniformed peacekeeping, is self-defeating. Getting more women into UN peacekeeping is a hollow victory if it means that these women are expected to conform to traditionally “feminine” roles or modes of behaviour. Indeed, such a situation may only serve to reinforce conservative gender regimes based on strictly-demarcated divisions between the sexes rather than break them down. Thus, “selling” gender – without taking on board the larger political project of gender equality – risks selling it out.

Advocates of the operational-effectiveness argument tend to find these critiques overblown, exasperating and counterproductive.<sup>31</sup> They argue that establishing access for women (to UN peacekeeping or national forces) is the most important task, and that once a sufficient level of participation is obtained, the evidence of women’s effectiveness will be both clear and irrefutable. Thus, any argument that convinces the right people to give women a chance is the best

26 See above, footnote 13.

27 In the UN context, this could refer to the culture of the sending military or police force, as well as the culture of the broader PKO.

28 There are, of course, wide differences in the local–peacekeeper relationship within peacekeeping missions themselves. In Liberia, the Nigerian peacekeepers (both men and women) uniformly claim a connection to the locals, something that most Liberians also agree with. With other national forces – even those from English-speaking countries – the relationship tended to be much more distant. In Haiti, meanwhile, the majority of the military peacekeepers came from Spanish-speaking Latin American countries or from South-east Asia; while officers are generally conversant in English, very few speak French. This invariably affects their relationship with the local population.

29 See especially Henry, “Peacexploitation”, forthcoming; Vilde Aagenæs, “*Who needs who? A critical analysis of the debate on women in UN peacekeeping operations*”, MA dissertation, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2010.

30 For a particularly critical account, see Aagenæs, “*Who needs who?*”, 2010; also Valenius, “A few kind women”, 2007; Sion, “Peacekeeping and the gender regime”, 2008.

31 This observation is based on personal discussions with several people involved in advocating for increased women’s participation in UN peacekeeping.

one to use. Rights-based arguments may be useful for people of a more liberal or progressive bent, such as development workers or human-rights advocates. However, in more-conservative institutions such as militaries, the most persuasive argument is the one that shows very clearly how the proposed change will improve the status quo. This is not achieved through political – and potentially polarising – advocacy of women's rights or equality, but through examples that the listener can relate to, such as those outlined above. There is no contradiction in “selling” women's participation in one way to one audience and in another way to another audience. The point is to make the sale. Sometimes the arguments tailored to particularly-sceptical audiences will involve more conservative framing than the “seller” her-/himself would prefer, but this is simply the reality of dealing with diverse audiences. Thus, concerns about reinforcing stereotypes or consolidating existing gender regimes are seen more as an excuse for inaction than something to be taken seriously. If the alternative is to carry on with negligible levels of women's participation, then worrying about the potential negative consequences of the operational-effectiveness argument seems to be misplacing priorities.

Not surprisingly, the critics of the operational-effectiveness argument – who, it should be emphasised, are *not* against women's participation in peacekeeping, but express doubts as to how it is packaged – are primarily researchers, while advocates are often practitioners, policymakers or politicians. This is an obvious outcome of the fact that a researcher's job is to ask critical questions (even of policies that she/he may generally support), while a policymaker's or practitioner's job is to decide on a course of action and get things done. Both sides are arguing in good faith. So where do we go from here?

There is no obvious answer to this question. The debate over tactics and principles is one that has played out recurrently throughout the feminist movement. For example, Helms describes how women's non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Bosnia-Herzegovina found themselves in a post-war environment in which important actors (donors, politicians and international bureaucrats) depicted Bosnian women almost uniformly as peacemakers and agents of ethnic reconciliation. Some women's

NGOs embraced these depictions out of conviction; others were sceptical of this act of framing, but nevertheless made a strategic choice to play into and affirm these stereotypes in order to “gain moral authority and real, though indirect, power with which to achieve their often very political goals”.<sup>32</sup> In other words, some women's NGOs were able to forward their agenda not *despite* prevalent stereotypes of women's “nature” and “proper sphere”, but *because* they were able to strategically manipulate these stereotypes. Such strategic behaviour seems to upend concerns about the potential negative impact of affirmative gender essentialisms. Yet Helms's conclusion is ambivalent. She writes:

... however successful women's efforts towards community level reconciliation, their efforts remain dependent on what happens in the formal political sphere from which they are consistently marginalized. Although women can make some progress outside of political channels and by pressuring politicians in various ways, it is ultimately up to decisions made by local politicians and international actors as to whether return and institutional reintegration happens. Women working towards reconciliation, or any other goal, would be much more effective if they were included and taken seriously as significant political actors.<sup>33</sup>

In other words, there is merit to both arguments; and it is likely that, on the specific issue of women's participation in PKOs, there will eventually be cases that seem to confirm both the foot-in-the-door and the backlash arguments. This debate is unlikely ever to be fully resolved. Yet so long as it is constructive rather than personalised or dismissive, both sides have an important role to play in setting realistic expectations and identifying barriers to progress for women peacekeepers.

## Conclusion

Increasing women's participation in PKOs has the potential to benefit all parties: the local residents of the mission area, the PKO, and individual peacekeepers, both women and men. Including a more-diverse range of experiences, capabilities

<sup>32</sup> Helms, “Women as agents”, 2003, p 15.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p 29.

and viewpoints at all levels of a PKO opens up the possibility of missions that are more responsive, less clubby and not as prone to group-think. Yet it is important to remember that gender is not the only relevant axis of identity. Class, race, religion, education, language, ethnicity, nationality, North/South – all feature heavily in the intersection of peacekeepers and locals. The host society is itself also divided along these lines, and in some key ways local elites may have more in common with peacekeepers than with their own fellow citizens.

The point of this observation is to show that the encounter between peacekeepers and locals can be fraught in many ways. The presence of women peacekeepers can sometimes make this encounter run smoother than it otherwise might. In other cases, the gender of the peacekeeper is secondary to the barriers posed by language, class, education, or the simple fact that the peacekeeper is uniformed and (possibly) armed. This complexity shows the limitations of essentialist arguments about what women peacekeepers can achieve. At the same time, sceptics of such essentialist arguments must be careful to ensure that, in critiquing the arguments made for women peacekeepers, they are not giving ammunition to anti-feminists.

Other recommendations regarding efforts to increase women's participation in peacekeeping include the following:

- More systematic research should be undertaken to examine the ways in which women peacekeepers contribute to the operational

effectiveness of peacekeeping missions and how these contributions differ (or not) from the performance of male peacekeepers. Such research could possibly focus on all-women or mixed police or military units, against a backdrop of “standard” (male-dominated) units – not to set up false differences, but to identify significant variations where they exist. The findings can then be used as concrete evidence in future arguments for women's participation that use operational effectiveness as the key element.

- Dependence on the use of affirmative gender essentialisms in arguing for increased women's participation should decrease; instead (or additionally), arguments should be put forward on the basis of the practical (rather than presumed) benefits that women peacekeepers bring, as well as on the basis of representation and equality.
- Financial and logistical support should be provided for mentoring programmes both within troop-contributing countries that send all-women or mixed units into the field (so that returning women peacekeepers' experiences are properly utilised), as well as among troop-contributing countries (so that countries like India, with its experience with all-female police units, can share lessons learned with other troop-contributing countries willing to contribute all-female or mixed units to future missions). South–South cooperation and mentoring could be particularly fruitful.

