



# Challenges Facing Women in Peacekeeping

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5 May 2016

**Author's Note:** *This opinion piece is based on research conducted among South African Peacekeepers, published in the Journal of International Peacekeeping, 19 (2015) 227-248.*

The motivation to increase the number of women in peacekeeping is based on the assumption that women peacekeepers enhance the access of local women to services, improve community relations, reduce the incidence of sexual and gender-based violence, build the capacity of local women and break down traditional views that discriminate and marginalize women. The extent to which women are able to perform these functions needs to be interrogated, as much of this rhetoric does not reflect the realities that women face on the ground. This is reflected in the findings of a study conducted among South African male and female peacekeepers returning from missions in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Darfur, Sudan. The findings are revealing, often countering many of the above-mentioned essentialist claims.

While there was general consensus that women peacekeepers are generally better at interacting with the local community, especially women and children, these claims were mostly context-specific. In the DRC, the female peacekeepers felt that they could reach out to women and children more readily. This was because 'Sousa' (as the locals call the South African contingent) tended to interact with the local community more than other contingents because they are mostly black, and could understand Swahili. This was not the case in Darfur, Sudan. Here, it was as if the local population (especially the local women) were afraid to speak to the peacekeepers, whether men or women. What this indicates is that not only gender, but race, the ability to speak the local language, and respect for the local culture are

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crucial determinants in fostering relations with the local community. Similarly, their ability to serve as norm-breakers, challenging existing stereotypes was met with some misgivings, given the fact that most often their identity was concealed behind their helmets and because of their low numbers.

In terms of improving the security of local women and children, female peacekeepers felt that locals placed more trust in male soldiers because they do not know how to judge female soldiers. Female peacekeepers also reported that they did not really know what the specific security concerns of women were, because little attention was paid to issues of gender in peacekeepers' mission-readiness training. Thus, they had little understanding of the underlying gender power relations in the communities. Nor did they know how to address or assist victims of sexual violence. In fact, most knew very little if anything about the gender dynamics in these communities and in some cases there was a general lack of cultural awareness. This influenced their ability to identify what the specific security needs of women were, how to protect them, or where to refer them if they needed to deal with cases of sexual violence.

What this means is that the ability of female peacekeepers to make a difference is limited by their training, which is gender-neutral and where they are expected to act and perform functions 'just like men'. The rationale for this is that when deployed on peace missions, all have to carry the same equipment, work in the same environment and face the same adversaries in the course of duty. This is specifically the case where they are drawn from the infantry environment and have to perform infantry-like functions. Added to this, women peacekeepers report being 'othered' on various levels. *Physically*, they are ridiculed for their lack of physical strength and endurance, especially on foot patrols. *Psychologically and emotionally*, the operational environment is

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seen to be more taxing for women, given the extreme forms of sexual violence against women. Women were also perceived to pose a '*gendered*' security risk, especially in hyper-masculine contexts where women are seen as sexual objects, are used as weapons of war where they threaten existing gender power relations that affect male dominance.

This results in female peacekeepers facing many different forms of gender and sexual harassment which are used to denigrate them. Some of the female peacekeepers who served in positions of authority explained how they were often not respected, ignored, undermined and faced frequent sexual advances. Such forms of gender harassment occurred often, but not considered serious enough to evoke punitive action. This was simply explained away in terms of existing patriarchal relations that could not be changed. However, in some cases this evoked open hostility towards them "because in Sudan it is considered disrespectful to their culture for women to be soldiers, carry rifles and wear trousers". Besides this, the threat of being raped served to further erode women peacekeepers' agency, especially where they were excluded from certain operations which were considered too dangerous by their commanders. In this way, not only were old gender stereotypes replicated, but they are used to undermine the prospect of an equal partnership between men and women.

What this shows is that even where national armed forces espouse gender equality, the peacekeeping environment remains hostile to women. Multiple masculinities, patriarchy and sexism undermines the ability of women peacekeepers to imbue alternative ways of dealing with and resolving conflict. The only way to 'regender' the military is to stop privileging masculinity over femininity. This is unlikely to happen where peacekeeping remains steeped in the warrior ethos and where the 'feminine' is not valued, is suppressed, seen

as a threat, or a liability. What is needed is for women to become less complicit and more assertive in making their voices heard. However, military women themselves typically do not embrace feminine values given the ‘nature’ of their work. They typically conform to and assimilate masculine values, norms and practices in order to be judged as capable soldiers. They have to assume what many term as a ‘militarized masculinity’, understood as the ability to ‘demonstrate an absence of emotion and a willingness to use violence’—they must excise all that is perceived to be feminine.

This makes it difficult to achieve the ideals advocated by [UNSC Resolution 1325](#). The aim of this resolution is not only to increase the number of women serving in the military, but to mainstream gender by bringing about a greater sensitivity to the different effect that war has on men and women. In this regard, there has been little progress as the number of military women serving on peacekeeping missions have remained around [3 per cent](#). Even in the South African armed forces where women now [represent 26 %](#) of uniformed personnel and up to [15%](#) of those deployed on peacekeeping missions, there seems to be little qualitative change in bringing about a more acrogenous military culture. This necessitates a closer introspection in terms of how women are trained, deployed and supported on peacekeeping operations. It raises the question as to whether a gender-neutral approach to gender integration in the military does not in fact perpetuate gender inequality. Clearly one cannot bring about a different perspective to war and peace if women are expected to embrace masculine norms and values and where gender difference is not recognised and valued.

Image of members of the Guatemalan contingent of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti participate in a medal award ceremony in

recognition of their service. Image by UN Photo via [Flickr](#).

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