

EEAS Academic Roundtable on Women Peace and Security in collaboration with the Swedish Defence University

Intervention by Nina Wilén

Brussels, 25 June 2019

Ladies and Gentlemen, I'm honored to take part of this academic roundtable with outstanding colleagues.

For this Roundtable, we were asked to read the Council Conclusions on Women, Peace and Security from December last year and if possible, speak to it, in our intervention.

I will speak to two articles from the Council Conclusions, articles 16 O and 16 F. Starting with 16 O which states that:

“The EU will avoid instrumentalization by recognising women’s rights in their own right, while ensuring that all programming is evaluated against, and shows verifiable contributions to, gender equality”

It is around this aspect that I would like to speak today: about the difficulties of avoiding to instrumentalize women’s participation, with a focus on women’s participation as uniformed personnel in peacekeeping operations.

Because if there is one domain where women’s participation has been instrumentalized, it is in peacekeeping.

I would like to highlight two of the challenges that we face when we try to avoid instrumentalization on this topic. These challenges are:

- Confusion between normative agendas and evidence-based research
- The extra burden that comes with expectations

1) The first one is the risk of entangling normative agendas with evidence-based research.

What I mean here, is that there is a tendency, even among us researchers, to argue for the inclusion of more women peacekeepers, not just because of the right for women to participate, but because of women’s added value.

Because women are supposedly:

- better at protecting citizens, especially women and children,
- better at defusing tensions because of their more conciliatory attitude
- better at ensuring assistance to victims of sexual violence as it is both easier for female victims to speak to other women, rather than men and because women supposedly have more empathetic responses
- are less likely to be perpetrators of sexual exploitation
- because women peacekeepers supposedly can serve as deterrents for male peacekeepers to commit sexual violence
- practically, women peacekeepers are supposedly able to search local women at checkpoints
- can establish better relations with local women's groups
- better at collecting intelligence of the local community

I'm not saying that all of this is not true, I'm saying that there is also research that shows that quite often, women's added value in approaching local communities is difficult to assess, partly because there is not always that much contact between uniformed and armed peacekeepers and local communities, and partly because locals are more likely to see the uniform rather than the gender of the peacekeeper.

With regard to women peacekeepers serving as deterrence of sexual violence or harassment, there is again little evidence that this is the case and from an ethical perspective this is a difficult claim to make.

Women in uniform are in a minority and are unlikely to be capable of changing the behaviour of the majority. From a purely ethical perspective it is also problematic to expect women to 'tell on' their male colleagues, especially so, as women in uniform are more likely to be victims of sexual harassment than women in other occupations.

With regard to women's capacity to handle cases of sexual violence better than their male peacekeepers – again, it is difficult to find clear evidence of this. On the one hand, in Lindy Heineken's and my own interviews we had female peacekeepers saying that female victims clearly preferred to talk to other women about such events, but at the same time, none of them mentioned ever having to deal with a case of sexual violence, despite them being deployed in areas where there are extremely high levels of rape.

I want it to be clear here, that I'm not saying that there is no added value of women peacekeepers, I'm saying that often, arguments of women's added value to peacekeeping operations come more from expectations of what women could add than what they actually do add, depending on the culture, the context and the conditions in which they deploy.

And here I'm coming to my **second challenge**: the expectations that are put on women peacekeepers.

- 2) As you have just heard, there are quite a lot of expectations on how women should contribute and make peacekeeping operations more effective and efficient. Again, here I'm happy to read that in the Council Conclusions, it is stated in article 16 f – *that the EU will avoid gender-stereotypical expectations of male and female roles.*

This is important because research has shown that women are trying to live up to these expectations by *doing more than their male counterparts* in order to prove that they do, in fact, add something extra, something that only women can add.

Lesley Pruitt for example, has shown that female peacekeepers in the first all-female formed police unit in the UN mission in Liberia *often worked a "second shift", engaging with local communities*, including working with schools and orphanages, offering free health care services for pregnant women and first aid courses to school girls - as *volunteer work*.

These women also got specific training in sexual and gender-based violence, yet, this training was the result of the women's own initiative, rather than a deliberate effort on the part of the UN to educate all of its peacekeepers in this domain. Hence, the women asked for specific training on these topics as they were expected to perform better than men in these areas.

What I'm trying to say here is that: *the more expectations we put on women to add something extra, to increase the operational effectiveness, the more burden we are putting on women* that are already in very delicate positions as clear minorities in a very masculine and male dominated environment.

And, if this point was implicit here, I should make it explicit: these expectations are not put on male peacekeepers and are therefore not conducive to gender equality.

To conclude, I think that these two articles in the Council Conclusions are important, far more important than what we think that they are, but I also think that they are very hard to follow and implement.

It is difficult for both advocates and opponents of women's participation in peacekeeping not to instrumentalize women's roles, functions and value.

And I think that the biggest risk against women's increased participation in peace operations may not come from the opponents but rather from the advocates.

The reason for this is that to increase women's participation, they – we - see a need to "sell in" the argument about women as something extra to policy makers, to political and military decision makers.

There are clearly good intentions behind this, in the sense that the aim is to gain access and representation to women, and clearly some women can – in some areas, in some contexts, and in some functions – add something extra that men cannot do – just as some men can add something extra that women cannot do in some areas, in some contexts and in some functions.

But we are shooting ourselves in the foot if we are basing women's participation in peace operations on instrumentalist arguments about what women can, could or should do.

Because regardless of whether some of the instrumentalists' arguments may ring true in certain contexts, and with certain women, in specific cultures, these arguments build expectations and extra burden on women that are only likely to increase gender inequality – rather than promote gender equality. In particular, instrumentalizing women's participation risks backfiring the moment that women fail to live up to the expectations that are set on them, and we are then faced with an additional hurdle to overcome.

Maintaining a rights-based argumentation to increase women's participation is therefore crucial, just as it is necessary to focus on recruiting more women in general to uniformed professions, like the police and the military. This can be facilitated if we take article 16 L of the Council Conclusions seriously: promoting the engagement of positive masculinity.

So, in sum: if we want to increase women's participation in peacekeeping, I think it might be better to focus more on making the police and the military more attractive workplaces for female recruits, by for example, working on engaging positive masculinity, rather than focusing on what women can, could or should add as peacekeepers.