



## AFRICA POLICY BRIEF

## What's the 'Added Value' of Male Peacekeepers? (Or – Why We Should Stop Instrumentalising Female Peacekeepers' Participation)

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How realistic and how fair are the expectations that we place on the small minority of female peacekeepers to bring an 'added value' to peace operations? Not at all, I argue in this brief, which examines the instrumentalisation of female participation and suggests that it is time to move beyond the question of an 'added value' that often translates into 'added burden'. Both male and female peacekeepers are needed for operations to be efficient, and therefore the focus should be on making the working environment more attractive for all. The first and necessary step to such a transformation is recruiting female and male leaders who are able to connect and communicate and who value diversity and inclusion.

### INTRODUCTION

What's the 'added value' of male peacekeepers? As strange as this question may sound, that is the very same question that has been asked over the past few decades with regard to the participation of female peacekeepers. This brief explores the discussion about the added value of female military peacekeepers, reviews the gaps in our knowledge of the issue, and opens up a debate on how to transform gender-biased institutions without reinforcing gender stereotypes<sup>i</sup>.

As the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security approaches, efforts to increase female participation in peace operations are multiplying. Numerous UN reports and policy documents<sup>ii</sup> emphasise the 'added value' that female peacekeepers can bring, explaining just how much more effective and efficient peace operations will be if we just manage to increase the number of female military

peacekeepers beyond the meagre 4% that they constitute today.

These efforts are thus well in line with the objectives of UNSCR 1325, which advocates for the increased participation of women in peace and security matters. Given that these arguments about women's 'added value' as peacekeepers are also mostly promoted by organisations that strive to foreground women's rights, we can assume that they are made with all the best intentions and with the hope that this will increase gender equality.

Yet, in this policy brief, I am arguing that there is a risk of contributing to gender *inequality* and a pushback against women's participation all together if we continue to instrumentalise female peacekeepers' participation.

This is because when we instrumentalise female peacekeepers we are also setting high expectations on them – an extra burden – which we are *not* placing on male peacekeepers. Research has shown that many female peacekeepers try to live up to these expectations by fitting into gender-related expectations and/or by working harder than their male colleagues.

Not only does this risk reinforcing gender-stereotypes, it is also not conducive to gender equality and may result in a backlash against female participation all together. This is especially the case as instrumentalist arguments about women's 'added value' build on research conducted on only 4% of all peacekeepers, making it difficult to

generalise from the findings. This, in turn, means that the arguments need to be contextualised and nuanced in order not to put unrealistic expectations on female peacekeepers.

I therefore suggest that we turn the tables and focus on the working environment in which female peacekeepers are to be integrated rather than the women themselves. Directing all our attention to a small minority of just over 4% suggests that we have got our priorities wrong. Instead, the focus should be on making the peace missions attractive workplaces for both genders. This includes addressing both relatively easy practical and infrastructural aspects, such as providing uniforms and body armours in the right sizes, to more challenging parts like fostering a more inclusive and open atmosphere where diversity is valued.

In the conclusion, I argue that there is a need to avoid gender-stereotypical language and expectations in the drive to increase female participation. While there clearly is a need to have more representative peace operations that show diversity in terms of gender, race and ethnicity, the instrumentalisation of these identities should be avoided.

This also implies that just as we should not have to answer the question about men's added value as peacekeepers, we should also move beyond that question for female peacekeepers. There is a need for *both* female and male peacekeepers to gain access to the whole population in all cultural contexts and

to represent the society they are charged with protecting.

### **THE NEED TO CONTEXTUALISE FEMALE PEACEKEEPERS' 'ADDED VALUE'**

The question of increasing the number of female peacekeepers has risen to the top of the political agenda in recent years when multiple scandals of peacekeepers' sexual abuse and exploitation (SEA) have tarnished the UN's reputation. This has coincided with a demand from member states, in particular the United States, to improve peacekeeping performance. It is thus against this background of a UN that seeks to improve its performance and clean up its reputation that the renewed push to increase the number of female peacekeepers should be seen.

The focus on female peacekeepers in this situation is linked to a host of arguments drawn from research and reports about women's added value as peacekeepers:

Women are supposedly:

- better at protecting citizens, especially women and children;
- better at defusing tensions because of their more conciliatory attitude;<sup>iii</sup>
- better at ensuring assistance to victims of sexual violence;<sup>iv</sup>
- less likely to be perpetrators of sexual exploitation;
- able to serve as deterrents for male peacekeepers to commit sexual violence;<sup>v</sup>
- able to search local women at checkpoints;

- better at establishing relations with the local community and thereby collecting intelligence;<sup>vi</sup> and
- viewed as female role models for the local community.<sup>vii</sup>

These are convincing arguments about why it is important to include women in peace operations. Yet there is a need to contextualise and nuance these arguments to better reflect reality and avoid putting unrealistic expectations on female peacekeepers.

The argument that female peacekeepers are better at accessing local communities, for example, needs to be contextualised. In some missions, the interaction between military peacekeepers and local communities is very limited, making access difficult for both female and male peacekeepers, while in other contexts, the locals are more likely to see the uniform before the sex of the peacekeeper.<sup>viii</sup>

In interviews with South African peacekeepers, for example, it became clear that context mattered in the question of whether female peacekeepers actually could interact with the local population. While women peacekeepers in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) could more easily establish relationships with the local females than their male colleagues, the opposite was true in Sudan.<sup>ix</sup> Due to an assumption that female peacekeepers attracted rebel attacks, the women were relegated to the base camp, thus impeding interaction with locals, or as a male officer explained:

'In Sudan we have to put them in the back seat; we rather keep them less visible. We try not to take them to "red areas".'<sup>x</sup>

To nuance this argument, it is important to note that in some cultural contexts, female peacekeepers might find it easier to access the local population, while in other situations, male peacekeepers are more likely to be able to engage. In other words, both male and female peacekeepers are needed to get access to local communities in different cultural contexts.

There is no doubt that women peacekeepers commit less SEA than their male counterparts. Research has shown that increasing the proportion of women from 0% to 5% in military components would reduce the expected SEA allegations by more than half.<sup>xi</sup> There is nevertheless a long and arguably morally dubious jump from this fact to assuming that women peacekeepers should be capable of working as deterrents preventing their male colleagues from committing SEA.

Not only are women in uniform in a minority and therefore unlikely to be capable of changing the behaviour of the majority, but from an ethical perspective it is also problematic to expect women to 'tell on' their male colleagues – especially as women in uniform are more likely to be victims of sexual harassment than women in other occupations.<sup>xii</sup>

There is an intuitive belief that for victims of SEA it is easier to talk to another female, as, in the large majority of cases, the perpetrator

is a male. In some contexts, there is indeed evidence that victims of SEA prefer to talk to female peacekeepers rather than male,<sup>xiii</sup> yet other research has shown that the most important factor is that the peacekeeper – regardless of gender – has received the right training.<sup>xiv</sup>

Some research has supported the claim that women are seen as better at defusing tensions and calming hostile and violent situations.<sup>xv</sup> This is clearly a valuable asset, yet there is no clear explanation as to why this is the case, and more research is needed to establish when and in what contexts this is true. Regardless of the explanation, one cannot ensure that all women will behave in accordance with the feminine role ascribed to them, making it risky to select peacekeepers based only on assumptions about their gender-stereotypical behaviour.<sup>xvi</sup>

More research is also needed to confirm the argument that female peacekeepers can serve as role models for local women. There are indeed examples of how female peacekeepers appear to have incentivised local women to join security forces, such as the case of the all-female policing unit in Liberia.<sup>xvii</sup> But this is not likely to be the case in all societies, at all times. In addition, encouraging local women to take on traditionally masculine positions in a highly patriarchal society may result in risky situations for the women themselves, thus reinforcing their vulnerability rather than empowering them.<sup>xviii</sup>

Moreover, given that the majority of perpetrators of violence in conflict-ridden

societies that host peace operations are men, it might be more appropriate to discuss the importance of *both* male and female peacekeepers serving as positive role models rather than just focusing on the women. This would be beneficial both to the host state and to the peace operation itself, while removing expectations and burden from female peacekeepers.

The arguments concerning women's added value to peacekeeping operations often arise 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. This leads to unrealistic expectations of female peacekeepers' performances – expectations that male peacekeepers do not have to carry.

### **EXPECTATIONS IMPLY EXTRA BURDEN**

As the previous section showed, there are many expectations of how women should contribute and make peacekeeping operations more effective and efficient. These expectations can, in some cases, lead to self-fulfilling prophecies as women are trying to live up to them by doing more than their male counterparts in order to prove that they do, in fact, add something extra, something unique to women.

Some research, for example, has shown that female peacekeepers in the first all-female 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 after their regular working hours.<sup>xix</sup>

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

In an interview I conducted with a female UN peacekeeper, she explained that she tried to engage with the local community by giving public speeches about her role as a woman in the military, thus living up to expectations about being a role model. Yet, these speeches were done in her free time, meaning that she, too, did a 'second shift' to live up to expectations about her added value as a female. Needless to say, her male colleagues did not do similar outreach activities as this was not expected of them.

Research on female Rwandan peacekeepers has shown that while the women were supposed to perform the 'added value' tasks, such as talking to SGBV victims, they did not get adequate training to do so, as it was expected that they already possessed these capacities as feminine 'natural caretakers'. The lack of suitable pre-deployment training led some women to organise nightly tutorials in their tent after classes to ensure that they could live up to the expectations, thereby starting their 'second shift' even before deployment.<sup>xx</sup>

High expectations on a small minority in a large organisation imply an extra burden to

carry. Female peacekeepers who attempt to live up these expectations are likely to prove their added value but, at the same time, undermine gender equality by working harder and more than their male counterparts. Moreover, if women fail to live up these expectations, a normative backlash may occur, prompting the question of why female peacekeepers should be allowed to participate at all.

### **TURNING THE TABLES**

Instead of focusing on women peacekeepers, a small minority in peace operations, we should focus on the working environment in which they are integrated. That is an environment which, for the most part, is constructed by and for men, with very little space for women. Men are, in other words, the ‘default’ setting in most uniformed professions. If we want more female peacekeepers, it is the working environment in which they are to be integrated that needs to be the focus.

Practical aspects from not having a gynecologist as part of the medical team in a peace operation to wrong sizes for uniforms and body armor are important in this regard. A 2017 report from the Swedish armed forces <sup>xxi</sup> showed, for example, that approximately 40% of the women did not have body protection or uniforms in the right size, while in my interviews with Burundian female soldiers I learned that there were no army boots in small sizes.<sup>xxii</sup> These are issues that should be easy to address to make the military a more attractive workplace for all genders.

More challenging matters to tackle are those related to the gender dynamics within the institution as a whole, where the ‘feminine’ is often seen as subordinate to the ‘masculine’, making it more difficult for women to be accepted and integrated fully. To change these dynamics requires a rethinking of what constitutes an efficient and effective military, where the primary objective must be to remain relevant in a changing security environment. In order to remain relevant, it is crucial to include both men and women and to value both femininity and masculinity equally.

Guiding the military institution through such a transformation requires a representative leadership that can connect, communicate and create confidence. Building an inclusive and welcoming environment based on mutual respect and trust is fundamental to creating an attractive workplace for all.

### **CONCLUSION**

Just as there is no reason to ask what added value male peacekeepers can bring, there is no need to enter into discussions about women’s added value as peacekeepers: their presence should no longer need to be justified. From a military perspective, it is clear that missions need access to the whole population in all contexts and cultures and this requires both male and female peacekeepers.

Nor is there any need to enter into debates about women ‘weakening’ or ‘softening’ the military organisation. There is sufficient research proving that women have (and have had for a long time) their place in all branches of the military.<sup>xxiii</sup> There is also

enough research to show that diversity in any organisation is an asset. While all-male teams make better decisions 58% of the time in comparison to individual decision-makers, the figure is 73% for gender diverse teams.<sup>xxiv</sup>

There is, however, a need to ensure that the right individuals are selected and tested based on the tasks that they are required to perform, not on assumptions of their capacities based on their gender identity.

Changing the working environment in the military in general and in peace operations in particular requires excellent leaders. Rather than focusing attention on women's added value, we should direct our attention towards recruiting and training female and male leaders to value diversity and inclusion,

on setting good examples, and on upholding standards.

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<sup>i</sup> This brief draws on interviews with both male and female military peacekeepers from various countries, as well as participation in both policy workshops and academic seminars on different aspects of the 'Women, Peace & Security' agenda.

<sup>ii</sup> UN Security Council 8508<sup>th</sup> Meeting (2019) 'Deployment of Female Personnel Boosts Effectiveness, Says Secretary-General, as Security Council Holds Open Debate on Women in Peacekeeping', 11 April 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13773.doc.htm>

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- <sup>vii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>viii</sup> Jennings, K.M. (2011) 'Women's participation in UN peacekeeping operations: agents of change or stranded symbols?' *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF) Report*, <https://noref.no/Publications/Themes/Gender-and-inclusivity/Women-s-participation-in-UN-peacekeeping-operations-agents-of-change-or-stranded-symbols>
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<sup>xxii</sup> Wilén, N. (2014) 'Security Sector Reform, Gender and Local Narratives in Burundi', *Conflict, Security & Development* 14(3): 331-354.

<sup>xxiii</sup> See, for example, MacKenzie, M. (2015) *Beyond the Band of Brothers. The US Military and the Myth that Women can't Fight*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Kristiansen, M. (2017). 'Women: A NATO Special Operations Forces Force Multiplier', *Small Wars Journal*, 24 May, available at: <https://www.stratagem.no/women-a-nato-special-operations-forces-force-multiplier-1/>

<sup>xxiv</sup> Larson, E. (2017). 'New Research: Diversity + Inclusion= Better Decision Making at Work', *Forbes*, 21 September, available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/eriklarson/2017/09/21/new-research-diversity-inclusion-better-decision-making-at-work/#5d125ff4cbfa>