

Gender and Peacekeeping: Progress and Challenges

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9 July 2019

UN peacekeeping has made considerable progress incorporating gender-sensitivity into its mandates and missions. Nonetheless, significant challenges remain.

Armed conflicts are gendered. Men are particularly prone to forcible recruitment and lethal violence. Women are disproportionately vulnerable to sexual violence and, alongside children, to forced displacement. In peace negotiations and as signatories to peace agreements, women remain starkly [underrepresented](#), undermining the prospect of gender-equitable peace. For example, in early 2019 Afghan women vocally [protested](#) the government's peace negotiations with the Taliban, fearing a return to repression.

The exclusion of women from formal spaces generally facilitates the all too common backlash against social, economic and political gains for women that often materialize in the social upheavals of [armed conflict](#). [Intimate-partner violence](#), likewise, often increases in the aftermath of armed conflict. And even where gender is a central issue in peace negotiations and the resulting peace agreements, commitment may dilute in the implementation phase. In Colombia, home to the most gender-sensitive peace agreement ever signed, implementation of the gender provisions, i.e. those stipulations that specifically aim at the involvement and leadership of women or LGBTIQ+ individuals, [lags behind](#) provisions that do not have a gender dimension, over two years into the process. With these patterns in mind, the case for gender-sensitive responses to armed conflict, including gender-sensitive peacekeeping, is strong.

Signs of Progress

Only by supporting and strengthening women's active participation in social, political, economic and security transformations, can peace operations contribute to gender-sensitive and inclusive peace. This is the ambition expressed in [United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325](#) (UNSCR 1325) and the [Women, Peace and Security](#) (WPS) framework which emerged from it. The WPS framework emphasises the need for the protection of women and girls from human rights abuses and sexual violence in conflict, the importance of strengthening women's representation and influence in peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction, and the need for more gender-sensitive peacekeeping itself. This includes mandates that integrate both a gender component and the deployment of female peacekeeping personnel.

UN peacekeeping has certainly made progress over the past two decades. In the immediate aftermath of UNSCR 1325, peace operations began integrating gender into their [operational practices](#), albeit unevenly so. Many UN peace operations now have gender advisors or gender focal points in place that are supposed to [assist](#) with ensuring a gender focus in daily operations, primarily through providing strategic advice to mission leadership, monitoring compliance with any gender provisions in mission mandates and providing gender-sensitive capacity-building support to personnel. Women's [participation](#) in peace operations has also increased

since UNSCR 1325 was passed in 2000. So has gender content in [peace operation mandates](#). In my research I have found that from 1948 until 2014, only 8% of UN peace operation mandates made any mention of women or gender, whereas 79% of mandates authorised between 2000 and 2014 did. As of last year, the United Nations has a “[Gender Responsive United Nations Peacekeeping Operations](#)” policy in place.

The challenges ahead

Nonetheless, severe challenges remain. Despite an increase in absolute numbers, the overall share of women in peacekeeping – especially in the military components – remains small. As of May 2019, women occupied only 4.7% of military posts and 14.5% of police posts in [UN peace operations](#). Women peacekeepers, moreover, are considerably [less likely](#) to be deployed to high-risk conflicts, i.e. to those settings where conflict violence generally and sexual violence specifically is most egregious. In these dynamics, scholars Sabrina Karim and Kyle Beardsley argue that the salience of [traditional norms](#) of protecting women – extending even to peacekeepers and military personnel – plays an important role.

The increasing visibility of sexual violence perpetrated by armed actors since the wars in Bosnia and Rwanda in the 1990s has amplified the women’s protection imperative. Global donor conferences in London in 2014 and most recently in Oslo in May 2019 have secured considerable pledges (US-\$ 363 million in [Oslo](#)) for sexual violence prevention and assistance to victims. Celebrity-populated [campaigns](#) draw the public’s attention to conflict-related sexual violence as a violence that affects primarily women and girls. The 2018 [Nobel Peace Prize](#) honoured the work of Dr. Denis Mukwege and Nadia Murad in making visible and confronting this violence.

The strengthening nexus between sexual violence and women’s protection in global discourse and policy has had an impact on the way international actors respond to armed conflicts. Recent research finds that international [involvement](#), and in particular the deployment of [peacekeeping forces](#), is more likely in conflicts with reports of prevalent sexual violence than in conflicts in which this violence is not reported at high levels. I identify similar patterns for UN peace operation mandates: more comprehensive [gender content](#) – referring both to women’s protection and to women’s participation – is more likely when sexual violence is reported as widespread in a conflict.

On the one hand, such findings are encouraging as they show that peacekeeping has become more attuned and sensitive to the gendered nature of armed conflict and to the unique experiences of women and girls. On the other hand, this gender-aware peacekeeping is skewed, in that it prioritizes armed conflicts in which one particular dimension of gendered conflict violence, i.e. sexual violence, is salient and visible. But as discussed above, armed conflict is gendered along different dimensions. In conflicts where women are predominantly affected by displacement, by land dispossession or by exclusion from political decision-making and peace processes, gender-sensitive peacekeeping is just as sorely needed.

Neither would a more equitable attention to different kinds of conflicts, including those without reports of widespread sexual violence, solve all problems. A major challenge that has emerged on the radar of scholars, observers and policy-makers is the [sexual exploitation and abuse](#) by peacekeepers themselves. [Impunity](#) remains rampant for sexual violence perpetrated by those mandated to protect, despite a [Security Council resolution \(2272\)](#) aimed at increasing accountability.

Another challenge rests in ensuring a more careful consideration of victims other than the (monolithically conceived) category of women and girls. While men and boys are also victims of CRSV, they remain much [less visible](#). In addition, the vulnerability of men to be subjected to forced recruitment and to lethal violence is a gendered conflict dynamic routinely [overlooked](#). The unique experiences and vulnerabilities of LGBTIQ+ individuals, including lesbian and trans women, are similarly [absent](#) from the WPS agenda and from peace operation mandates.

Conclusion

To conclude, UN peacekeeping has made considerable progress in terms of inserting the experiences of women into its mandates and missions ever since UNSCR 1325 was authorized in 2000. Gender content in peace operation mandates has increased at a particularly high rate, indicating that understandings of armed conflict and priorities in peacekeeping have shifted radically. However, a view of gendered conflict that revolves primarily around sexual violence and women's protection still predominates. What is needed for a more comprehensive implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda is an approach that more carefully considers the plethora of other forms of conflict violence and conflict dynamics that affect women differentially in situations of conflict and that, crucially, centralizes women's agency.

The less than impressive track record of women's deployment in UN peace operations further suggests that change is also needed in the armed forces of troop contributing countries, where such gender imbalances originate. Amidst such efforts to more actively involve women in peacekeeping in order to remedy their historical marginalization, it is important to remember that gender does not equate women. In the long term, a truly gender-sensitive approach to peacekeeping will need to move beyond the (often simplified and universalizing) focus on women and girls to consider also men and LGBTIQ+ populations as both victims of gender-based violence and agents of change.

Image credit: [UN Photo/Flickr](#).

About the author

Anne-Kathrin Kreft holds a PhD in Political Science (2019) from the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. She researches conflict-related sexual violence, women's civil society activism and the Women, Peace and Security framework. Her work is published inter alia in the Journal of Peace Research and the Journal of Conflict Resolution. Her personal website: [anne-kathrinkreft.com](#).