

Women in Blue Helmets: How Increasing Participation Creates Pathways for Peace

Submitted for consideration for the McLennan Essay Prize for Women, Peace and Security

15 May 2020

Word Count: 2439

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE					Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)		2. REPORT TYPE			3. DATES COVERED (From - To)	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
				5b. GRANT NUMBER		
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
				5e. TASK NUMBER		
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)					8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)					10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
					11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT						
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES						
14. ABSTRACT						
15. SUBJECT TERMS						
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON	
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code)	

In their foreword to *Women on the Frontlines of Peace and Security*, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta note, “If we hope to prevent conflicts and build lasting peace wherever war, violence, and instability threaten communities, we must empower women as full and equal partners at every step.”¹ Critical to building this lasting peace are United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations, multi-dimensional and complex missions that range from enforcing peace agreements to rebuilding political and security structures. This multi-faceted mission set requires a composition of troop contingents, military observers, and police forces, including women.² Women’s participation in peacekeeping operations increases mission effectiveness in many ways, including improving trust and accessibility among local populations, addressing the unique needs of women and victims of gender-based violence, and setting an example for local communities. Yet, women are still under-represented among uniformed peacekeepers. To fully harness the talents of female peacekeepers, the UN and troop-contributing nations must address root causes of exclusivity in the peacekeeping force, bolster inclusive policies, and incentivize and promote peacekeeping as a critical mission set.

Female Blue Helmets: Critical Peacekeeping Agents

According to the UN’s *System Wide Strategy on Gender Parity*, women’s meaningful participation in peacekeeping operations has a direct impact on mission effectiveness in several ways.³ Prior to addressing how women peacekeepers specifically improve peacekeeping, it should first be noted how diversity as a whole, and women’s contributions to problem-solving,

¹ Hillary Rodham Clinton and Leon Panetta, foreword to *Women on the Frontlines of Peace and Security*, (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2014), vii.

² Sabrina Karim and Kyle Beardsley, *Equal Opportunity Peacekeeping: Women, Peace and Security in Post-Conflict States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 12.

³ United Nations, “*System Wide Strategy on Gender Parity*,” (New York: United Nations, October 2017), 5.

can produce positive outcomes. Research into the effectiveness of diverse teams demonstrates that such groups not only bring new approaches or ideas to the table, but they also avoid the proverbial “group-think” and stoke more creative problem-solving to complete tasks.⁴ Clinton and Panetta note that women in particular help create better outcomes when they are included in peace, security and reconstruction processes, prioritizing issues like human rights, employment and health care, which are essential to making peace and security plans longer-lasting.⁵ This trend is also evident in a study of the inclusion of women in peace agreement negotiations over two decades. In the more than 180 agreements signed between 1989 and 2011, processes that included women led to a 35 percent increase in the probability the agreement would last 15 years.⁶ While not related to uniformed peacekeepers specifically, these studies point to linkages between diversity of thought – and the inclusion of women in peacekeeping processes – to creating lasting solutions.

Moving beyond theory, female peacekeepers play a critical role in improving accessibility and promoting trust with local populations. Retired U.S. Army Gen. Carter Ham, former commander of U.S. Africa Command, noted that in addition to promoting core values like equality and citizenship, integrating women in militaries operating on the continent helped the force interact with local populations and address security needs across gender lines.⁷ This access is critical; women are valuable sources of information for peacekeepers on the ground, as they are knowledgeable about their communities and can help peacekeepers understand the needs

⁴ “Better Decisions Through Diversity: Heterogeneity Can Boost Group Performance,” *Kellogg Insight*, 01 October 2010, accessed 06 October 2019. https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/better_decisions_through_diversity.

⁵ Clinton and Panetta, foreword to *Women on the Frontlines of Peace and Security*, vii.

⁶ Laurel Stone, “Quantitative Analysis of Women’s Participation in Peace Processes,” Annex II in *Reimagining Peacemaking: Women’s Roles in Peace Processes*, (New York: International Peace Institute, 2015), 34-35

⁷ Carter F. Ham, “Working with African Nations to Support the Role of Women as Agents of Peace and Security,” in *Women on the Frontlines of Peace and Security* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2014), 117.

of the population.⁸ According to Donald Steinberg, noted expert on women, peace and security, “Even in regions where women are excluded from formal leadership, they [peacekeepers] will get some of their best ideas and most reliable ground truths from the community’s women...If they want to know whether reforms of the justice and security sectors are working, they should not just talk to the judges or the generals; they should ask women in the community.”⁹ Similarly, the UN’s Assistant Secretary-General for Africa, Bintou Keita, notes that an increased presence of women peacekeepers can tap into this vital source, ensuring the mission fully understands the protection requirements of the local population.¹⁰ This increased access to women is critical in many areas, including early warning. Women are often the most reliable sources in identifying community tensions, reporting changes in behavior of men, and identifying hidden arms or contraband.¹¹ For example, studies in Kosovo and Sierra Leone found that women had valuable information regarding weapons stockpiles and impending violent attacks, but believed they had no one to whom they could report this information.¹² In instances such as these, incorporating female peacekeepers is critical to addressing the needs of the population and securing access.

It is also important to note that peacekeeping occurs in gendered environments, and female peacekeepers have significant comparative advantage in addressing gender issues. Indeed, conflict and post-conflict environments disproportionately affect women. Conflict

⁸ Clinton and Panetta, foreword to *Women on the Frontlines of Peace and Security*, vii.

⁹ Donald Steinberg, “Looking through the Gender Lens: More Stable Peace through Empowering Women,” in *Women on the Frontlines of Peace and Security* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2014), 13.

¹⁰ Bintou Keita, “Women in Peacekeeping: An Operational Imperative,” interview with *Medium*, 14 October 2018, <https://medium.com/unpeacekeeping/women-in-peacekeeping-an-operational-imperative-24d4e9a86250>.

¹¹ United Nations, *A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325* (New York: UN Women, 2015), accessed 25 September 2019, https://wps.unwomen.org/pdf/en/GlobalStudy_EN_Web.pdf, 198.

¹² Hannah Wright and Minna Lyytikäinen, *Gender and Conflict Early Warning: Results of a Literature Review on Integrating Gender Perspectives into Conflict Early Warning Systems*, (London: Saferworld, May 2014), 3, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/810-gender-and-conflict-early-warning>.

increases rates of sexual violence, poverty, and unemployment.¹³ Additionally, women and girls are often excluded or marginalized in the resulting humanitarian or peacekeeping processes designed to assist them.¹⁴ As affirmed in the June 2015 UN's Independent High-level Panel on Peace Operations report, uniformed women "play a vital role in reaching out and gaining the trust of women and girls within local communities, understanding and detecting their unique protection needs and tailoring the responses of peace operations."¹⁵ Women peacekeepers operate within and respond to this gendered environment, providing a "humanizing" dimension to peacekeeping,¹⁶ often undertaking activities that would be considered inappropriate for men.¹⁷ For example, female medical personnel are invaluable to providing medical care to women in segregated societies.¹⁸ The UN also notes that female officers are often in high demand for protection and investigation teams for crimes involving female victims or witnesses. Additionally, female peacekeepers are invaluable in interacting with women in cultures or societies where they are prohibited from speaking alone to men, or if doing so would be either culturally inappropriate or potentially humiliating.¹⁹ This is especially true in interacting with survivors of sexual assault, working in women's prisons and conducting house and body searches.²⁰ For instance, in a study of perceptions of peacekeepers in Bangladesh, interviews

¹³ UN Women, "Women in Armed Conflict," United Nations, accessed 04 Oct 2019.

<https://beijing20.unwomen.org/en/in-focus/armed-conflict>.

¹⁴ Njoki Kinyanjui, "The Invisibility of Women and Girls Affected by Humanitarian Crises," *Medium*, 11 March 2015, <https://medium.com/humanitarian-dispatches/the-invisibility-of-women-and-girls-affected-by-humanitarian-crises-e7d66a7ed01f>.

¹⁵ United Nations, *Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on United Nations Peacekeeping Operations*, (New York: United Nations, 2015), accessed 01 October 2019, https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2015/446, para. 201.

¹⁶ Kacie Candela, "Women's Roles as UN Peacekeepers: A Status Report," *Pass Blue*, 07 August 2018, <https://www.passblue.com/2018/08/07/womens-roles-as-un-peacekeepers-a-status-report/?highlight=karim>.

¹⁷ Karim and Beardsley, *Equal Opportunity Peacekeeping: Women, Peace and Security in Post-Conflict States*, 54

¹⁸ Mary Hope Schwoebel, "The Essential Role of Women Peacekeepers," *United States Institute of Peace*, 02 May 2012, accessed 06 October 2019, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2012/05/essential-role-women-peacekeepers>.

¹⁹ Keita, "Women in Peacekeeping: An Operational Imperative."

²⁰ United Nations, *A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325*, 141.

found that approximately 90 percent of participants from an all-female unit believed that civilian women felt “more comfortable” with female peacekeepers than with male peacekeepers.²¹ This ability for peacekeepers to connect with women in the populations they serve is critical given the connection between women’s physical security and states’ relative peacefulness.²²

Lastly, women peacekeepers can set a positive example for local populations and can spur institutional change. Keita notes that female peacekeepers act as role models for local populations, inspiring marginalized women and girls to seek parity in their own societies and in the peacemaking process.²³ According to UN policy advisor Comfort Lamptey, the presence of female blue helmets had a notable positive effect in influencing local populations: “We had women from Timor Leste and Burundi attest to the fact that we had women peacekeepers helped them galvanize their own aspirations to either join the local police.”²⁴ Notably, the women of the Indian Formed Police Unit (FPU) in the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) has been acknowledged by the Liberian president as serving as role models and proving that women can perform effectively in male-dominated fields.²⁵ The mission noted that after the FPU’s deployment, the percentage of women in the national police force grew from 13 percent to 15 in less than a year.²⁶ This positive example, leading to increased representation in societal institutions, is critical to peacekeeping effectiveness and prevention of further conflict, as

²¹ Julia Bleckner, “From Rhetoric to Reality: A Pragmatic Analysis of the Integration of Women into UN Peacekeeping Operations,” *Journal of International Peacekeeping* 17, no. 3-4, (2013) 347-348. DOI: 10.1163/18754112-1704009

²² Michelle Bachelet, “Women as Agents of Peace and Stability: Measuring the Results,” in *Women on the Frontlines of Peace and Security* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2014), 104.

²³ Keita, “Women in Peacekeeping: An Operational Imperative.”

²⁴ Barbara Schoetzau, “Women Peacekeepers Can Work with Female Victims, Set Example for Male Colleagues,” *Voice of America*, 27 October 2009, accessed 06 October 2019. <https://www.voanews.com/archive/women-peacekeepers-can-work-female-victims-set-example-male-colleagues>.

²⁵ United Nations, *Ten-year Impact Study on Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security in Peacekeeping* (New York, United Nations, 2010), 27.

²⁶ “Women UN Peacekeepers - More Needed,” *The New Humanitarian*, 20 May 2010, accessed 06 October 2019, <http://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2010/05/20/women-un-peacekeepers-more-needed>.

evidence shows that states with higher levels of political and social gender equality are less likely to resort to the use of force.²⁷

While incorporating women blue helmets in peace operations has many benefits, detractors may argue that increasing female quotas may overlook more qualified candidates or decrease the overall quality of troop contingents. Studies abound on the efficacy of integrating women in the military and in combat. Rather than analyze both sides of the argument, the U.S.'s recent decision to open all military occupations to women serves as a model of how research into the issue has led to policy changes. Former U.S. Secretary of Defense's Ash Carter's December 2015 memorandum states that after more than three years of "deliberate, methodical, evidence-based and iterative process that ensures combat effectiveness and protects the welfare of the force...no exceptions are warranted" to opening all career fields to women.²⁸ Similarly, the UN noted in its 2017 *System Wide Strategy on Gender Parity* that "the assumption that the recruitment and promotion of women would somehow lessen standards rather than raise them is refuted by evidence."²⁹ Additionally, a 2016 study by human resources platform ImpactPool of more than 1,600 current and former UN staff members noted that "women and men are equally well prepared when entering the UN." While this particular study addresses civilian members, parallels could potentially be drawn to uniformed peacekeepers.³⁰

Scholars also caution against placing too much emphasis on incorporating greater numbers of women as a "catch-all" solution. For instance, each local population is unique, the category of women is not homogenous and there are often cultural differences among female populations.

²⁷ United Nations, *A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325*, 206.

²⁸ Ash Carter, "Implementation Guidance for the Full Integration of Women in the Armed Forces," Secretary of Defense Memorandum, 03 December 2015, accessed 06 October 2019, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/OSD014303-15.pdf>.

²⁹ United Nations, "System Wide Strategy on Gender Parity."

³⁰ Henrik Ryden, *Are Women Paying a Higher Price for a UN Career?*, White Paper (Stockholm: Impactpool, June 2017), 4.

While acknowledging that women bring specific, needed capabilities to the gendered peacekeeping environment, commanders should be cautious in not limiting them to these roles and should ensure their tasks fully contribute to meeting the mission mandate.³¹

Recommendations for Harnessing Talent and Ensuring Peacekeeping Effectiveness

Despite the noted benefits of uniformed women bring to peacekeeping operations, representation is lacking. Prioritizing women's equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex is part of the United Nations since its founding.³² Yet, the UN notes, "The most stark and difficult to address gaps persist in peace operations... The fact that only 3% of UN peacekeepers and 10% of police are women hampers our protection reach and operational effectiveness and sends the wrong message about who the UN serves and represents."³³

While these gaps are significant, any recommendation must go beyond simply increasing numbers. First, the peacekeeping community should counter the narrative that peacekeeping is "masculine." The security sector has ingrained identities that uphold traditional "masculine" values, valorizing these individuals as warriors and protectors. Glorifying these identities and conflating masculinity to the peace operations process perpetuates gender imbalance, as more "feminine" roles are considered less important, leading women to be denied key positions.³⁴ Additionally, female peacekeepers are habitually sent to less conflict-prone "safe spaces" due to preconceptions that women need to be protected.³⁵ Not only do these biases limit female peacekeepers' potential opportunities to provide help where it is most needed, but they perpetuate stereotypes that may discourage otherwise qualified women to pursue opportunities in

³¹ Ibid, 55.

³² Charlotte Bunch, "Women and Gender," in *The Oxford Handbook on The United Nations*, eds. Thomas G. Weiss and Sam Daws (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 496.

³³ United Nations, "System Wide Strategy on Gender Parity."

³⁴ Sabrina Karim and Kyle Beardsley, *Equal Opportunity Peacekeeping: Women, Peace and Security in Post-Conflict States*, 30.

³⁵ Kacie Candela, "Women's Roles as UN Peacekeepers: A Status Report."

peacekeeping. Commanders should ensure women are treated equally in assignments, and more broadly, the peacekeeping community should counter the narrative that peacekeeping is inherently a field for men.

Secondly, nations must make their militaries and training processes more inclusive to ensure talented and qualified women have opportunities to participate. All blue helmet military personnel are members of their own national forces; a majority of are infantry soldiers.³⁶ As contributing nations have full discretion regarding composition of their forces, barriers like combat exclusion policies for women directly affect nations' ability to provide larger numbers of female blue helmets.³⁷ For instance, while India is one of the largest UN peace operations troop contributors, only 0.8 percent of their peacekeepers are women.³⁸ This research does not propose recommendations to address inequalities in foreign militaries; even the U.S., arguably one of the most liberal democracies in the world, did not admit women to serve in combat occupations until January 2016.³⁹

However, even if contributing troop nations do not allow women in infantry roles, they can still maximize women's participation. For instance, they can deploy women from a variety of other career fields (such as engineering or medical specialties) based on the unique needs of the mission.⁴⁰ Troop-contributing nations can also ensure recruitment standards reflect the actual requirements in the field, so as not to exclude talented applicants.⁴¹ Missions and contributing

³⁶ United Nations Peacekeeping, "Military," United Nations, accessed 29 September 2019.

³⁷ Karim and Beardsley, *Equal Opportunity Peacekeeping: Women, Peace and Security in Post-Conflict States*, 34.

³⁸ United Nations Peacekeeping, "Operational Effect and Women Peacekeepers: Addressing the Gender Imbalance."

³⁹ Cheryl Pellerin, "Carter Opens All Military Occupations, Positions to Women," U.S. Department of Defense, 03 December 2015, accessed 05 October 2019.

<https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/News/Article/Article/632536/carter-opens-all-military-occupations-positions-to-women/>.

⁴⁰ Keita, "Women in Peacekeeping: An Operational Imperative."

⁴¹ Karim and Beardsley, "Female Peacekeepers and Gender Balancing: Token Gestures or Informed Policymaking?," 467.

nations can also consider using the successful model of all-female FPU, which have increased female participation in peacekeeping, in the context of military units. The U.S. Marine Corps Female Engagement Teams and Army “Lioness” teams in Afghanistan and Iraq provide notable examples.⁴²

In addition to these national efforts to broaden opportunities for women, the UN can offer incentives to encourage more women to take part in peacekeeping operations. The UN already offers compensation to peacekeepers above their military salaries⁴³ and has encouraged troop-contributing nations to offer additional financial incentives, such as a “gender balance premium” for female members.⁴⁴ It can go a step further by paying a premium directly to troop-contributing nations that provide female personnel in high-ranking positions or influential roles.⁴⁵ In addition to monetary incentives, the UN should make accommodations more “gender sensitive,” addressing concerns from women serving in austere areas, including a lack of feminine hygiene products, cramped living quarters, remote shower facilities and substandard lighting.⁴⁶ The UN should also prioritize work-life balance measures, adding to existing programs like shortened, six-month rotations for female peacekeepers with young children to further recruit and retain women in the field.⁴⁷ Lastly, the UN must enforce its codes of conduct, especially regarding treatment of women and sexual assault and harassment. Female service members who engage in

⁴² Hope Hodge Seck, “Marine Corps Revives Female Engagement Team Mission,” *Marine Corps Times*, 05 August 2015, accessed 06 October 2019, <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2015/08/05/marine-corps-revives-female-engagement-team-mission/>.

⁴³ United Nations Peacekeeping, “How We Are Funded,” United Nations, accessed 05 October 2019, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/how-we-are-funded>.

⁴⁴ United Nations, *A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325*, 142.

⁴⁵ Jamille Bigio and Rachel Vogelstein, “Increasing Female Participation in Peacekeeping Operations,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 26 September 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/report/increasing-female-participation-peacekeeping-operations>.

⁴⁶ Seble Menberu, “Women in Peacekeeping Missions in Africa: the Case of the Ethiopian Army Deployed in Abyei (Sudan/South Sudan Border),” *LAMenparle*, 23 January 2019, https://lamenparle.hypotheses.org/978#_ftn1.

⁴⁷ Keita, “Women in Peacekeeping: An Operational Imperative.”

“male coded tasks,” such as policing are often victims of sexual harassment and assault by their male counterparts;⁴⁸ further, many alleged perpetrators do not face justice once they are repatriated.⁴⁹ The UN must work with troop-contributing countries to ensure peacekeepers are thoroughly trained and screened prior to entering the mission and any instances of blue-on-blue gender-based violence are immediately addressed.

Finally, the UN and troop-contributing countries should continually promote peacekeeping as a mission set. They have taken several measures already; for example, the UN is currently working with member states to facilitate gender parity training courses; additionally, the Female Military Officers Course, offered four times annually by UN Women is aimed at increasing the number of qualified women deploying in support of peacekeeping operations.⁵⁰ Ambassador Jonathan Cohen, deputy U.S. representative to the United Nations, recently noted that “peacekeeping is a shared responsibility that comes with shared costs.”⁵¹ The U.S. should contribute to these costs and take a leadership role in encouraging member states to contribute more female troops, for example, by launching programs with partners to boost recruitment and retention, and by ensuring female representation in U.S.-led military and police peacekeeper training programs.⁵² Lastly, no good strategy is complete without a marketing element. The UN should continue to highlight contributions of female peacekeepers to help boost recruitment and retention, showcasing their positive contributions through news stories, photos, videos, and social media posts available to a world-wide audience.

⁴⁸ Annica Kronsell, *Gender, Sex, and the Postnational Defense: Militarism and Peacekeeping* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴⁹ Olivera Simić, “Does the Presence of Women Really Matter? Towards Combating Male Sexual Violence in Peacekeeping Operations,” *International Peacekeeping*, 17:2 (2010): 192, DOI: 10.1080/13533311003625084.

⁵⁰ Bintou Keita, “Women in Peacekeeping: An Operational Imperative.”

⁵¹ Jonathan Cohen, U.S. Deputy Representative to the United Nations (address, UN Security Council Debate on Peacekeeping Operations, Washington, DC, 09 September 2019).

⁵² Bigio and Vogelstein, “Increasing Female Participation in Peacekeeping Operations.”

Conclusion

Women in uniform provide tangible, invaluable and lasting contributions to peacekeeping. Yet, much work remains for contributing nations and the UN in eliminating inequities and enabling women to serve as full and equal partners in the peacekeeping process. The United States, UN troop-contributing nations and the UN at large, who hold a privileged responsibility to promote peace and security worldwide, share an equal charge to ensure all peacekeepers can commit to this mission to their fullest potential.

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