

Gender Parity in Peace Operations: Opportunities for U.S. Engagement

By **Luisa Ryan and Shannon Zimmerman**

On November 14–15, 2017, the government of Canada hosted the UN Peacekeeping Defense Ministerial Conference.¹ Over 500 delegates from 70 countries, the African Union, the United Nations, the European Union, and NATO met in Vancouver to discuss improvements to UN peacekeeping operations and secure new pledges from UN member states.

At the conference, Canada announced the launch of the Elsie Initiative on Women in Peace Operations.² Named after the trailblazing feminist Elsie MacGill, this initiative will join Canada and the UN in partnership with other interested member states to address the obstacles to placing more uniformed women in peace operations.³ While member states have committed to a target contribution of 15 percent female personnel, currently uniformed female peacekeepers make up only around 3 percent of troops deployed. Often, this dearth of women peacekeepers reflects the lack of women in the national militaries of troop contributing countries. The Elise Initiative represents a practical, innovative measure by an active member of the peacekeeping community to address this fundamental deficit and advance gender inclusion.

The Elsie Initiative members will develop a systematic approach to deploying more women in peace operations. Through tailored technical support, the initiative aims to help troop contributing countries recruit and retain female soldiers. It is one of the first initiatives to directly address the lack of female personnel at the deploying country level. Canada contributed an initial \$15 million to establish the initiative and pledged an additional \$6 million to assist UN missions in supporting and leveraging women's contributions within peace operations.⁴

As one of the co-hosts of the 2017 UN Peacekeeping ministerial, the United States is in a strong position to partner in the work of the Elsie Initiative. By so doing, it can entrench the concept of gender parity in its current UN peacekeeping training programs and deployments and better lead knowledge-sharing efforts with partner militaries. The Elsie Initiative also gives the United States an opportunity to reinforce partnerships that enhance global security while bolstering its leadership in gender parity and UN reform. There is bipartisan recognition of the fiscal and strategic value of UN peace operations in achieving US national security and foreign policy objectives.⁵

The Presidential Memo of September 28, 2015, noted that UN peace operations are one of the most meaningful mechanisms for international burden-sharing to address the threat of violent extremist groups, human trafficking, endemic diseases, and mass flows of refugees and displaced persons.⁶ The 2018 National Defense Strategy builds upon this memo, highlighting the value of international partnerships as the backbone of collective security, particularly the value of strengthening alliances and attracting new partners to share the burden of global security.⁷ Efforts such as the Elsie initiative to improve the effectiveness of peace operations will directly benefit US national interests by strengthening alliances and enabling recipient countries to take an increasing role in providing for collective and regional security.

Background

UN peacekeeping operations play a vital role in maintaining international peace and security. Currently, over 100,000 UN personnel from 125 countries are deployed in 15 missions.⁸ This makes peace operations the largest deployed military force in the world. While the annual budget for peacekeeping is approximately US\$6.8 billion, this amounts to less than 0.5 percent of global military spending. Thus peacekeeping operations are by far the most cost-effective method for intervening in conflict and postconflict countries.

The 2017 Defense Ministerial Conference focused on what it called the “3Ps”: pledges, planning, and performance. It was an effort to chart progress from the 2016 defense ministerial held in London, facilitate pledges from member states to fill key capacity gaps such as rapid deployment units and helicopters, and to increase the UN’s capacity to plan and undertake peace operations.⁹ Canada in particular focused on increasing women’s participation in security forces and peacekeeping operations.

To be most effective, peace operations—and armed forces in general—should strive for gender representation that reflects the composition of their country’s populations. Female peacekeepers provide different perspectives on protection, peacebuilding, intelligence gathering, and early warning. Having female peacekeepers allows the mission to connect with women in conflict-affected communities, who often bear the brunt of violence, including conflict-related sexual violence, and may also curb sexual exploitation and abuse by UN peacekeepers.

The role of women in peacekeeping and peacebuilding was highlighted in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace, and Security. Since then, seven other UN resolutions have addressed engaging women in conflict resolution.¹⁰ Despite this apparent support, the UN has struggled to implement these resolutions internally within the UN structure as well as externally in deployed operations. Key challenges include lack of funding, political will, and available uniformed female personnel.¹¹ The 3 percent of UN peacekeepers that are women are largely employed in supporting roles.¹² At the current rate of increase, it would take 37 years to reach the five-year target that the UN Security Council set in 2015: to double the number of uniformed women deployed in UN peacekeeping operations.¹³

Very few women serve in the police and militaries of the countries that contribute to peace operations. Several of the core troop and police contributing countries, such as Ethiopia, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, have an evolving but limited culture of women in the security services.¹⁴ When asked to deploy women troops or police, these countries fall far short of the target percentages, despite their best efforts. Recent Department of Peacekeeping Operations figures show that only eighteen of all the troop contributing countries reached the target of 15 percent deployment of women that was set at the 2016 defense ministerial. Fifty countries sent only female police officers, and forty sent no women at all. Western countries may have slightly higher percentages of women. For example, in October 2017 women made up roughly 16 percent of the US army. However, Western countries contribute far fewer soldiers to peace operations, some none at all.

Even when women police and soldiers are present, UN missions have struggled to leverage their participation effectively. Female peacekeepers may be given gender-specific jobs such as teaching women self-defense or conducting classes on sexual violence and HIV/AIDS. Additionally, women officers are often confined to more administrative roles or not given the same consideration as their male colleagues—despite having the same qualifications. This restriction limits both the strategic impact women can have in peacekeeping operations and the credibility of gender equality efforts within missions. Yet female peacekeepers have proven themselves to be just as effective as male peacekeepers, perhaps more so. For example, the Indian All-Female Formed Police Unit that was deployed to Liberia, from 2007 to 2016, was so effective and professional that then Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf specifically requested they provide her security detail.¹⁵ As the Indian contingent’s commander in Liberia, Colonel Madubala Bala also noted, “When the local women see the female peacekeepers, they get inspired by them—[They see] ladies can perform the same role as male counterparts.” In fact, when the all-female unit arrived, 6 percent of Liberia’s security sector was made up of women; that number has since jumped to 17 percent, surpassing many more developed nations.¹⁶

The Elsie Initiative has been criticized for perpetuating a pattern of developed countries leading policy and financing while troops from the global south serve in increasingly dangerous contexts. Monique Cuillerier, a Canadian representative with the Women, Peace, and Security Network, observed, “It’s hard to see how Canada can actually fulfill many of their recently announced ‘Women, Peace, and Security’ priorities if Canadian peacekeepers are sitting on the sidelines.”¹⁷

It is important to highlight the differing commitments and policy influence of the global north and south in UN peacekeeping. However, these critiques should not detract from the important goals of the Elsie Initiative. The initiative's focus on inclusivity, sharing of peacekeeping best practice, and financial and training assistance between nations may help distribute the burdens of peacekeeping but these efforts should not serve as a substitute for contributing troops to peace operations.

Having done more than any other state to partner with and build the capacity of troop contributing countries, the United States should ally with Canada in its efforts to achieve gender parity in peace operations. Past US efforts included the Africa Contingency Operations Training & Assistance (ACOTA) program and the Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI), which focus on building recipient countries' capacity to become active contributors to regional security and their own. Like these, the Elsie Initiative will enable countries to draw upon resources to make them more effective security providers.

Policy Recommendations for the United States¹⁸

The United States is in an ideal position to leverage its existing expertise to support efforts to integrate women into the military and into peace operations. Below are several ways it could support and augment its current initiatives:

Promote the Value of Female Peacekeepers. Female peacekeepers make a peace operation more effective. Peacekeepers likely understand the value of protecting women and listening to their concerns but may not yet understand the value of deploying female peacekeepers. Training could emphasize the utility of female peacekeepers conducting body searches on women, engaging with the female population, and investigating instances of sexual assault and supporting survivors. These benefits should be highlighted as an *addition* to the general benefit of having a well-trained, capable soldier regardless of gender. Such training should be interactive, providing space for male soldiers to ask questions and address concerns, and could decrease the likelihood that female soldiers are relegated to menial or administrative tasks. Men and women, boys and girls will experience conflict differently, necessitating a gender lens. Peacekeepers' ability to identify and address these conflict factors enhance their effectiveness and the quality of the peace they are able to support.

Continue to Support Current US Training Efforts. US-supported peacekeeper training should be gender sensitive and include not just training on sexual exploitation and abuse but also the role gender plays in conflict. Additionally, peacekeeper training should continue to include skills such as conflict analysis (including gender analysis), mediation, and negotiation. Training could be jointly conducted with civilian staff to encourage understanding of perspectives across components. Such skills allow peacekeepers to avoid highly masculine military-based approaches and craft inclusive and therefore more sustainable approaches to resolving tensions on the ground.¹⁹

Add Value Directly to Troop Contributing Countries. The United States deploys specialized trainers and equipment, ensuring that forces receiving US support and training can become effective, professional, and contribute to the efficacy of peace operations. This expertise could be leveraged to support increased deployment of female soldiers from partner countries. Best practices may include design and logistical advice on dedicated facilities for ablutions and hygiene in austere conditions. It may also include policy advice on advancement and leave to ensure that women with families are able to deploy and will benefit from the experience as much as men do.

Lead by Example. The United States should commit to deploying an increased number of female US military and police personnel to UN peace operations. This can be accomplished most simply by ensuring that the current limited number of staff officers deployed to force headquarters have adequate female representation. Such deployments provide US women unique skills development opportunity while setting an example for other countries.

Share Lessons and Expertise. The United States has a diverse array of programs already in operation domestically as well as in partnership with other nations that could inform the effective, efficient inclusion of women in peace operations. Collecting these best practices and lessons learned and sharing them with troop contributing countries would be an easy, effective way of increasing their capacity to integrate women. Particularly valuable would be information to help military leadership begin integration without enforcing stereotypes. For example, the US military can provide best practices for the recruitment and retention of females, help with reform of personnel sections to accommodate common life milestones such as marriage and childbirth, and revising gendered standards for physical capabilities to ensure that what is being measured is what really counts in peace operations.

Troop contributing countries may have limited experience in deploying women to austere living conditions in potentially very remote communities. Female troops may require separate considerations. More conservative nations may have further cultural needs that may affect the appropriate deployment of female officers. Mobile and temporary operating bases—which are becoming more common, especially in the more robust missions—may also need to be altered to accommodate women. The US has mission design and planning expertise in deploying female troops that it can share for the benefit of all countries.

Play the Long Game. Integrating women into the militaries of troop contributing countries and then into peacekeeping forces is vitally important for ensuring the best possible mission results. These efforts will take time. Rather than rushing to promote women to positions of authority or into new roles without proper training, there should be a gradual increase over a five- to ten-year period, addressing all levels from recruit to field grade officers and senior noncommissioned officers. These soldiers need career management and mentorship to ensure that male colleagues do not elbow them out.

The United States has a strong interest in collective security and regional capacity. US support to peacekeeper training has improved the effectiveness of peacekeepers from dozens of countries in conflicts around the world. Deepening this support to ensure that troop contributing countries are able to recruit and retain female soldiers—thereby making peacekeeping forces more inclusive and effective—is a logical next step in improving allies' abilities to contribute to global security.

References

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Authors

Luisa Ryan and **Shannon Zimmerman** are PhD researchers at the Asia Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, University of Queensland and 2017 WIIS Next Generation Fellows

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