



## Gender, Peacekeeping, and Operational Effectiveness: Recommendations for the Deployment of Women in Peacekeeping Operations

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### Summary

*In the twenty years following the adoption of the first United Nations Security Council Resolution on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS), the integration of women to peacekeeping operations has become a priority for several international security organisations and national armed forces. The Canadian government and the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) have become leaders in the implementation of the WPS Agenda. As they look for ways to increase women's meaningful participation to peacekeeping operations, the context of every mission should be prioritised before a fixed number of women peacekeepers.*

### Introduction

[United Nations \(UN\) Security Council Resolution 2538](#), adopted unanimously in August, is the first standalone resolution on women in peacekeeping. Beyond its historic

nature, the strong support for the resolution and its elaboration as a peacekeeping resolution, and not as a Women, Peace and Security (WPS) resolution, signal two important advances. First, it shows that the topic of women and peacekeeping is no longer siloed into a “women’s issues” discussion, and is instead starting to be integrated into priority Security Council matters – like peacekeeping. Second, it implies that the Security Council has widely accepted the argument that having more women peacekeepers will increase the performance and effectiveness of peacekeeping. While the integration of women and peacekeeping to mainstream discussions at the UN is laudable, the relation between the deployment of women and operational effectiveness remains mostly undefined. What is the relation between gender and operational effectiveness?

The argument proposed here is that gender and sex can influence operational effectiveness in specific scenarios where





women are in roles with significant human interactions. These are interactions with the local population, opposing forces, and inside the peacekeeping force. The context of every peacekeeping mission should determine how women are deployed. This paper surveys the operational effectiveness argument as deployed in several policies, including Canada's Elsie Initiative for Women in Peace Operations. It highlights several conceptual flaws in the operational effectiveness argument before proposing to define it differently. The article concludes with a series of recommendations for the deployment of women in peacekeeping operations.

### **Women in Peacekeeping: the Operational Effectiveness Argument**

Women's participation to peacekeeping has been tied to operational effectiveness since the 1990s. The 1995 Beijing Conference, the Windhoek Declaration, and the Namibia Plan of Action highlighted the link between the presence of women and resilience of peace, postulating that principles of gender equality are essential for the effectiveness of peacekeeping operations (United Nations, 2000). UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) materialised civil society's advocacy in a political engagement to increase the participation of women and led the way to a series of UN Resolutions on WPS. Since then, the UN and other international security organisations have adapted their policies and practices to reflect WPS principles, and made the meaningful participation of women in all aspects of peace and security a priority. With

its [Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy](#), the UN's Department of Peace Operations (DPO) seeks to reach 15% of women in military contingents and 30% of women in police forces in all contingents deployed by 2028. NATO adopted a [policy](#) to support the UN Resolutions on WPS in 2007, noting that "representation of women across NATO and in national forces is necessary to enhance operational effectiveness and success". Through the [Elsie Initiative for Women in Peace Operations](#), launched at the 2017 UN Peacekeeping Defence Ministerial in Vancouver, Canada committed to reach a UN target of 15% of women in uniform in every peacekeeping operation by 2028. The Elsie Initiative aims to increase the meaningful participation of women in peace operations and sees gender as a way to enhance operational effectiveness.

Similarly, most academic research on women in peacekeeping examines the positive impact of women in blue helmets. Think-tanks and NGOs' publications also focus on finding ways to increase women's participation in all aspects of peace operations. In recent years, numerous research publications have proposed several ways in which women peacekeepers increase operational effectiveness. The claims can be synthesised into six categories of propositions:

1. Women peacekeepers positively affect operational effectiveness when performing practical tasks involving other women, like body searches or caring for victims of sexual violence;





2. Women peacekeepers are more effective at gaining local population's trust as they are perceived as less threatening than men peacekeepers;
3. Women peacekeepers improve the credibility of the peacekeeping force;
4. The presence of women peacekeepers reduces instances of sexual and exploitative violence from men in the peacekeeping force;
5. Women in peacekeeping contingents constitute role models and contribute to the empowerment of local women and girls; and
6. Women's aptitude to communicate with local women and girls enables the collection of more nuanced and more complete human intelligence.

These propositions all share the idea that women bring something different to peacekeeping operations, therefore contributing to increasing their effectiveness.

## Operational Effectiveness and Peacekeeping

There are several problems associated with the operational effectiveness argument. [Some researchers](#) have pointed out that an argument capitalising on the particular skills of women reinforces gender roles, promotes an essentialist view of women and places unfair expectations on deployed women. The militarisation of the WPS agenda<sup>1</sup> is also seen as a real danger. Crucial goals of the WPS

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<sup>1</sup>In feminist literature, militarisation refers to the processes by which military norms and practices are extended to the civilian realm. Enloe, *Maneuvers: The International Politics*

agenda, notably gender equality and the pursuit of peace, risk being co-opted by military imperatives in service of security; this is especially so in a global pandemic context where pressing human security and health issues have put [gender equality on the back burner](#).

Another problem is the lack of empirical knowledge to substantiate claims related to the positive impact that women peacekeepers have on different aspects of a peacekeeping mission's effectiveness. Many propositions laid out above rely on limited or anecdotal evidence. Pointing at this lack of empirical research, and at the difficulty to establish causality between gender and operational effectiveness, a growing number of scholars have reacted to current policies aimed at promoting women's participation to peacekeeping. [They question](#) the assumption that there is a direct link between the number of women engaged in peacekeeping and the effectiveness of the mission.

In addition to the limited empirical knowledge substantiating them, most propositions do not clearly indicate how *gender*, not just an increased presence of women, affects operational effectiveness. This points to the need to differentiate between gender and sex when analysing the deployment of women in peacekeeping missions. How do gender, femininity, and sex affect operational effectiveness?

*of Militarizing Women's Lives*; Sjöberg and Via, *Gender, War, and Militarism: Feminist Perspectives*; Shepherd, 'Making War Safe for Women?'





Incidentally, operational effectiveness, the other key variable to investigate the proposition that more women will influence peacekeeping missions' effectiveness, is very rarely defined in the literature. Operational effectiveness is an important yet elusive concept which should be developed along with gender in the context of peacekeeping.

### Conceptualising Gender

Gender, in addition to the presence of women, influences the effectiveness of peacekeeping missions. [Charli Carpenter's](#) distinction of sex appearance and gender performance is useful to characterise the different roles played by women peacekeepers. While sex appearance refers to bodily attributes such as hair or breasts, gender performance refers to the way a man or a woman interprets his or her gender and behaves. While sex appearance is generally straightforward, gender performance is more subjective. It relates to societal constructions of masculine and feminine "typical" gender roles and consequently varies according to cultural contexts.<sup>2</sup> Gender performance conceived as such is clearly differentiated from sex and provides a way to evaluate the impact of both sex and gender in the peacekeeping context.

For example, a woman peacekeeper, despite wearing fatigues and a helmet, can most likely be easily identified as a female (sex

appearance). Her behaviour (gender performance) will vary according to her personal motivations as a woman, soldier, and peacekeeper; if she wants to fit in and be "one of the boys", or prove herself, she might adopt behaviours more typically associated with traditional masculinity, such as smoking, swearing, or being more assertive. A peacekeeper's behaviour is in turn interpreted by the other actors with whom she interacts, creating complex gender dynamics.

Figure 1 Canadian soldier in Bosnia (DND)



The appearance of sex, performance of gender, and interpretation of both thus have the potential to become equally important in the way women peacekeepers behave and are perceived. A peacekeeper's gender performance affects the way she approaches and accomplishes tasks and influences how other interact with her. As a result, gender, conceived as both sex appearance and gender performance, is a factor susceptible to have an impact on the way a peacekeeping mission is carried out, affecting its overall effectiveness.

<sup>2</sup> This does not constitute an endorsement of fixed gender roles but a reference to archetypal Western societal gender roles.





## Conceptualising Operational Effectiveness

In addition to gender, operational effectiveness is the other key variable invoked in policies and claims linking the deployment of more women to better peacekeeping missions. Despite being at the core of most discussions about increasing the number of women peacekeepers, operational effectiveness remains an elusive concept. Since the 1990s, attempts to develop models to [assess operational effectiveness of peacekeeping missions](#) have run into several hurdles, including the complexity of developing meaningful metrics and the difficulty of comparing different types of peacekeeping missions. A most important conceptual problem, illustrated by [Diehl and Druckman](#), is the lack of distinction between performance and outcome. Indeed, most of the literature on peacekeeping tends to conflate operational effectiveness with mission success. Yet, operational effectiveness should clearly be distinguished from operational success. This is especially the case when looking at the performance of individual actors – women peacekeepers – punctually involved in complex, multilateral operations – like peacekeeping operations. Even if one developed a model to assess it, evaluating operational effectiveness in terms of mission success, or outcomes, cannot be fully conclusive. The peacekeeping contingent is one of many factors likely to influence peace and stability in a host country. If the goal is peacebuilding, evaluating operational effectiveness as mission success would require finding a way

to isolate the performance of individual peacekeepers among a number of complex intervening variables. If the aim is reduction of violence, assessing a negative objective would make it difficult to determine which actions contributed to the desired end state.

Looking at operational effectiveness as a process is more promising. Literature on gender and peacekeeping, even if it does not clearly define it, provides insight on operational effectiveness. [Researchers have argued](#) that gender is a force multiplier, allowing for the performance of more tasks, or different type of tasks – hence contributing to enhance operational effectiveness. A [study](#) examining the performance of Female Engagement Teams (FET) in Afghanistan, even if they did not operate in a peacekeeping context, are particularly insightful. Notably, the effectiveness of US Marines and Army FET has been evaluated based on the input of tasks affected by gender. In a study of the implementation of UNSCR 1325 in Afghanistan, [Olsson et al](#) analysed day-to-day tasks and activities which were improved, or could have been improved, by having more female soldiers. The process, more than the result, is what is examined here.





This task-oriented vision of effectiveness focusses on tactical level tasks of individual peacekeepers. Consequently, it conceives operational effectiveness as the performance of tasks contributing to the realisation of a peacekeeping mission. This multilayered understanding of operational effectiveness allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the roles of women in peacekeeping missions. The tasks performed by women and the contexts in which they execute them can be broken down to isolate instances where gender performance or sex had an impact.

### Three Recommendations for Canada

Guided by the conceptualisation of gender as performance and operational effectiveness as process, an analysis of 25 in-depth interviews with Canadian peacekeepers deployed in 1990s peacekeeping missions<sup>3</sup>, confirmed that multiple factors, including gender, influence the performance of tasks in complex peacekeeping missions. While these results cannot be universalised, they empirically illustrate the role of gender and

sex in different peacekeeping contexts, thus constituting a first step towards understanding the relation between gender and operational effectiveness.

Figure 2 Canadian soldiers in Haiti, 1995 (CAF Combat Camera)



The interviews illustrated the importance of context: gender performance, sex, and sometimes both, can affect the execution of tasks depending on the operating environment, local gender norms, type of peacekeeping mission, and roles played by women peacekeepers. In particular, gender performance and sex specifically impact operational effectiveness when women peacekeepers are in roles with significant human interactions. Specifically, gender performance and sex have the most impact in

<sup>3</sup> The interviews were conducted in 2020 as part of the author's Master's research project. The participants, 17 women and 8 men, were recruited through snowball sampling. 20 were officers and 18 came from the army environment. Interviewees were from a variety of army trades, ranging from combat arms (7) to medical (3) to logistics (3). Communications officers and technicians (3), an administration clerk and a military police officer were also interviewed. Interviewees from the air force environment were pilots (3), supply technicians (2), air weapons system technician (1), and aerospace engineer (1). Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours. In a semi-structured format, participants were asked ten questions and their answers prompted different follow-up questions. The first two questions covered contextual information about their deployment and previous operational experiences.

Participants were asked to describe the types of tasks they conducted and explain what a typical day was like in theatre, if there was such a thing as a typical day. They were also questioned about their perception of the mission's effectiveness, and the types of interactions they had with other actors like NGOs or civilian populations. Female interviewees were asked if they thought they could perform certain tasks differently, and if they received certain tasks because of their gender. Male interviewees weighed in on these questions and on the roles of the women who were deployed with them. Finally, they were asked to give their opinion on policies linking gender and operational effectiveness.





interactions with the local population, combatants, and in interactions within the peacekeeping force.

Three recommendations follow:

**There should be women in every peacekeeping contingent in roles as varied as possible.** Internally, communication is facilitated and cohesion improved when women are in leadership roles, contribute to problem solving, and provide formal and informal counselling. Because it is the right thing to do, and because it improves the effectiveness of teams by making them more diverse, there should be women in every peacekeeping contingent in roles as varied as possible.

**The number of women deployed in peacekeeping contingents should be adapted to the operational environment and its cultural specificities, not fixed at a certain percentage.** The impact of gender and sex is context-specific. Cultural norms regarding the roles of women – in families, communities, societies, politics, military institutions, etc. – as well as societal norms regarding foreign women and armed forces matter when it comes to interactions between women peacekeepers and locals. In some contexts, gender could be detrimental to interactions. It could also be completely irrelevant, or less important than factors like language or religion. In addition to the context, the type of peacekeeping should also be considered. Wider, multi-dimensional peacekeeping missions offer much more opportunities for such interactions than

traditional peacekeeping, and even more so than stability interventions. Missions mandating a peacekeeping force to support civilians and humanitarian needs or to keep factions apart should dictate the need for an increased number of women in precise roles rather than an absolute percentage requirement.

**In order for gender and sex to have a positive influence on operational effectiveness, women peacekeepers should be employed in roles involving contact with local population or interactions with opposing forces.** To be in keeping with the spirit of the WPS agenda, the roles in which women peacekeepers are employed matter. For example, having a certain percentage of women concentrated in the support tail of a mission or flying aircrafts does not contribute directly to enhancing operational effectiveness. The impact of feminine gender performance and sex depends on other actors' perceptions and reception – local men, women and children, combatants, or peacekeepers. Gender and sex are therefore most effective in the performance of the type of tasks involving interactions with those actors: intelligence gathering, engaging local populations, negotiating with opposing forces, among others. Specific examples of tasks include presence patrols, providing medical care to women and children, and supervising civilians working for the peacekeeping force.

