

The Importance of Female Peacekeepers

Gender, Protection of Civilians and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda are modern concepts for modern militaries. Protection of the people, women, in particular, demands a people-centred design. It's not about us in the UN Peacekeeping Force, it's about the affected population in the area we are operating in. This article intends to highlight not just the importance of female peacekeepers but also the importance of integrating a gender perspective into all of our planning and operational activities in MONUSCO.

Let me start by saying that I joined the military to be a soldier, to serve my country, to serve Ireland and its interests at home and abroad. My motivation to serve my country is no less honourable nor indeed practical than any of the male military personnel reading this article. I joined the military because I wanted to challenge myself, I wanted full time employment and I wanted to make a meaningful contribution to society. I am therefore fortunate that Ireland has a long and proud tradition of serving with the United Nations on Peacekeeping Operations.

I saw first-hand in South Lebanon when I was deployed as a Platoon Commander with UNIFIL, the importance of female participation and the importance of mixed tactical teams. How my very presence, and that of the few females deployed with me – allowed greater access to the population we served, the population we are mandated to protect. As a result of this greater access, we were able to gather more detailed information, allowing our force to analyse the security threats effecting all demographics – learning that treating the population we served as a single homogenous group would lead to a failure to implement our mandate and a failure to mitigate against the threats to women, men, girls and boys.

Overseas, in many mission areas that the UN are currently deployed in, there will be greater differentiation between gender roles. Indeed, conflict and war can exacerbate existing inequalities and reinforce gender stereo-types. Female peacekeepers can use their 'perceived' femininity as an asset not as a vulnerability and use the gender bias present in the local culture and the local perception of the 'role of women' to the advantage of the force – gaining the trust of both men and women. For the women, those who are directly impacted as a result of the conflict, they want their voices heard, they want their experiences shared and they want to be part of the peace-building process – NOT passive recipients of 'security' – In certain countries, where there are religious or cultural constraints which don't permit the interaction or communication with males, the mere presence of women on patrols and on checkpoints enables us to engage, to listen and most importantly to act on the information we gain. We need to also recognize the diverse roles women play in conflict; they are active combatants, they are human rights advocates, they are influencers, they are leaders and yes, they are often victims.

Engagement, Information gathering, analyses, assessments - For population – centric operations to respond to the security needs of the whole community, this understanding must be gendered. In my opinion, Modern militaries are better at fighting but less capable of resolving conflicts. There is a largely untested theory out there that more women in Peacekeeping Operations will equal less violence and less violence will lead to a more successful Peacekeeping Operations. Yes, women have a very unique role to play in the prevention, pre-emption and response to sexual violence but I must state this important point - women are as entitled to peacekeeping jobs as men without the burden of 'civilizing' and improving the mission's operational effectiveness. Women don't need to justify their existence in the security sector and importantly, the responsibility for protecting women and men against CRSV and SEA rests on each and every individual deployed on Peacekeeping Operations – Male or Female – the responsibility is on all of us and should be on troop contributing nations. Diverting

responsibility to women does not address the problem of sexual violence and in fact, in missions where there are low numbers of women or indeed, a total absence of women, it essentially passes the buck. If Gender Based Violence (GBV) and CRSV are labelled as a 'Women's Issue', men are then reluctant to engage and respond to these issues.

Mixed teams and diversity is an enormous strength within a professional and effective military force – an asset and force multiplier for modern Peacekeeping Operations. We know that understanding the human factors of an area of operations is central to counterintelligence and counterinsurgency operations. With the current figure of military and police women on Peacekeeping missions standing at 3.6% it cannot fall on my shoulders or the limited number of females on UN Peacekeeping Operations to ensure that a gender perspective is mainstreamed and implemented. The reality is that our Force does not always have the necessary numbers of females to deploy mixed teams on the ground and therefore Female Engagement Teams (FETs), when properly trained and employed, can be of enormous benefit. Consequently, the importance of integrating a 'Gender Perspective' into all of MONUSCO's operational activities must be highlighted. A 'Gender Perspective' is to have the ability to detect if and when, men, women, girls and boys are being affected differently by a situation due to their gender. Females and males should both be trained in Gender and Gender Analysis. Gender does NOT equate just to women.

A Gender Analysis is the systematic gathering and examination of information on gender differences, age and sex, gender dynamics, patterns of movement and social relations in a given area. The role of the Gender Advisor is to gather the information, analyse it and make recommendations to the Commander. The perspectives of both women and men, their insights and skills add value across all planning activities. Women need to be included in the process at all levels otherwise the security we as a Force provides, may be off target.

For the Commander – a Gender Perspective is a tool used to better understand the society as a whole. In order to achieve mission success and to reach the desired effects a Commander must fully understand the operational environment. In addressing both the male and female parts of the population, additional information and improved situational awareness is expected.

We need greater diversity within our ranks and we need more women because women make our organisation better, stronger and more responsive to the needs of the society we serve. Put pressure on your countries to fully integrate women into your military forces and to deploy more women overseas. You can see first-hand here in the DRC the importance of highly trained female Peacekeepers. Furthermore, I encourage each and every one reading this article to seek the guidance of trained Gender Advisors, to engage with the Gender Affairs Unit and with the Women's Protection Advisor, and most importantly to ensure that every UN Peacekeeper deployed with MONUSCO has received gender training, the responsibility is on all of our shoulders to be 'Gender Aware'.