

Contributions and Challenges: Female Participations in UN Peacekeeping Missions

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Abstract

This essay is an analysis on the contributions and challenges of female participation in UN peacekeeping missions. It presents why it is worthwhile to have more female participation, and provides a number of recommendations. It considers the UN's effort in gender mainstreaming into peacekeeping mission to demonstrate how females can be involved in UN security. Finally, it looks at a specific example of the Indian all-female formed police unit (FPU) sent to Liberia on a peacekeeping mission in January 2007. The Indian units were not only able to enhance safety and security of Liberia but in addition were better able to protect women and girls from sexual exploitation and abuse. This paper uses a series of case reports, articles, and books to analyze female contributions.

Keywords: UNSCR 1325, women, peace and security, gender balance, peacekeeping, Liberia, Indian FPU.

Introduction

United Nations peacekeeping mission is a collective action that helps to resolve conflict in the world. United Nations has highlighted gender balanced and timely process peacekeeping mission with different initiatives. The conceptual roots of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 came from the 1995 Beijing Platform for Actions that endorsed women in armed conflict. After 5 years (known as Beijing +5), UNSCR 1325 passed in the year 2000 and adopted "Women, Peace and Security" (Cohn, 2001). It was a revolutionary achievement in establishing the agenda of peace and security including gender mainstreaming in peacekeeping operations (Tryggstad, 2009; Willett, 2010; Crawford & Macdonald, 2013; Dam, 2013). The Resolution called on all member states to encourage female participation in UN peacekeeping missions focusing on participation, protection, relief and recovery (Pratt, 2013). The resolution also encouraged female participation at all levels of the state, including in the appointing at higher levels of police, political leadership, recruitment of military or police officers, and foot soldiers. The resolution also called for the increase of female participation for the goal of "gender equality and representativeness" with regard to peacekeeping missions (Jennings, 2011).

Before the UNSCR 2000 declaration, the Windhoek Declaration and the Namibia Plan of Action were acknowledged in 1999, which focused on gender balance and equality in all peacekeeping missions. The United Nations has argued that women have been deployed in different areas for a long time including as police, military, and civilian roles that are helpful not only in peacekeeping, but also in ensuring women's rights. In addition, the UN claimed that women peacekeepers have performed in the same role of their male counterparts even in difficult conditions (Pruitt, 2016; Bertolazzi, 2010). Since the adoption of Resolution 1325, globally, female awareness on conflict has risen which has helped recognize their role in "resolving conflicts and building peace". Issues have been identified on behalf of women in regard to peace and security. These included "early warning and conflict prevention; peacekeeping and peace support operations; peace processes such as mediation, peace talks, and signing of peace agreements; and post-conflict peace building" (alaga, 2010, p. 1).

The United Nations Security Council has supported gender equality labeled as "gender mainstreaming" or "gender balance." Since UNSCR 1325 passed in 2000, female participation has increased in peace building and post-conflict reconstruction. Cohn (2004) illustrated women as peacemakers and men as war-makers, so that females should have roles in any peacekeeping process because they have genetically more empathetic attitudes. Nevertheless, the recruitment of male peacekeepers still greatly outnumbers female. The advocacy of inclusion apparently isn't amounting to substantial action in UN activities (Pruitt, 2016).

History of Women Participations in Peacekeeping Missions

According to UN statistics, women participation in peacekeeping missions has been slowly increasing. Historically, female peacekeeping soldiers were introduced in 1957. There were only 5 of 6,250 soldiers during the period 1957 to 1979. The number increased to 20 of 20,000 military personnel by 1989 (Bertolazzi, 2010). 1% of uniformed women personnel were deployed in UN peacekeeping missions in 1993 (Pruitt, 2016), while 1,235 of 65,555 (1.8%) were female in the military in 2006. A total of 1,034 women of 71,673 (1.7%) were in the military in 2007 (Bertolazzi, 2010).

The UN is still a male dominated organization with 13% female in decision-making positions in the Secretariat by the end of 1994 (DeGroot, 2001). In addition, a UN source indicated that 1% of military personnel deployed in international operations in 2004 were female. In 2010, female peacekeepers had increased to 7%, and in the military to 2%. In 2012, 3% in the military were female and 10% were peacekeepers, these same figures continued up to April 2015 (Pruitt, 2016).

The UN has encouraged its member states to recruit females into the police service and UN police operations as gender priorities since UNSCR 2000. Some countries have enthusiastically contributed women peacekeepers in missions. Female police and troops in 2009 included Pakistan (10,989), Bangladesh (9,424), India (8,640), Nigeria (6,001), Nepal (3,924), Rwanda (3,635), and Ghana (3,283) (Bertolazzi, 2010). On the other hand, there are many countries that have no women in their national army (Alaga, 2010). To inspire this, 48% women increased UN Headquarters staffs in 2012. Similarly, the UN had set a policy to increase females in both police and soldiers up to 20% by 2014 (Pruitt, 2016). The ambitious target was set to achieve a 50/50 representation by 2015. However, there was only one mission, the United Nations Transitional Assistance Group in Namibia (UNTAG), that implemented the initiative (Bertolazzi, 2010).

For the first time in UN history, the first all-female police unit (FFPU) was sent to Liberia in UN peacekeeping in January 2007. They played a significant role in security in Liberia, and their presence encouraged Liberian women to join in the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and the national police force. Since then, Liberian women have recognized this UN initiative as an opportunity in establishing their identity, and improving their standard of living (Pruitt, 2016; Jennings, 2011). In another example, Jordanian women have participated in peacekeeping missions since 2007 in Libya, Sudan, Afghanistan, Liberia, and Ivory Coast in the army and civil defence. They have played significant roles in conflict-affected areas including abuse against women and children (Husseini, 2016).

Women's Contributions to Peacekeeping Missions

Should there be female participation in UN peacekeeping missions? The debate is whether women constitute only a vulnerable group or if they can play a significant role. Some have argued that women could play a crucial role in society not only helping women and children but also establishing peace and security if they but have the chance. The UN maintains that inclusive participation in peacekeeping mission is a better strategy to achieve sustainable peace (Alaga, 2010). Others have argued that the security sector is for men not for women because they are physically stronger and more competent to such tasks (Pruitt, 2016; Milosevic, 2012).

Academic literature on peace and security has much on women peacekeepers, especially in protecting women and children. They have “a greater awareness of and sensitivity to their particular needs and challenges, because women peacekeepers are less provocative than men” (Jennings, 2011, p. 2). In many cultures and societies, women are not willing to share their personal needs and challenges to men, but they can easily talk to other women about their personal problems. In addition, women peacekeepers are less likely to commit abuse, and are generally less corrupt and abusive (Jennings, 2011; States News Service, 2010).

However, gender stereotypes can have negative and positive connotations regarding women, peace, and security. Negative influence has blocked women serving in military services throughout the world (DeGroot, 2001), but women have proven to better perform in the post-conflict settings where female peacekeepers can quickly “establish better relationships with local women” to help normalize things. They “help to de-escalate tensions that had arisen between their male colleagues and locals” (Jennings, 2011, p. 5). As noted above in the case of Indian FPU in Liberia, the UN mission was able to aid local women and empowers them to defend against sexual assault and violence (Pruitt, 2016; Jennings, 2011).

Female peacekeepers have both endogenous and exogenous effects. They are more sensitive, sympathetic, and well mannered within mission and they better maintain gender relationships. In contrast, current UN personnel are aggressive, and frequently commit sexual exploitation and abuse. Scholars argue that females are less sexually driven than men and this helps in interpersonal skills (Jennings, 2011). Female medical staff in post-conflict settings would be especially good in “countries where traditional culture forbids any physical contact between men and women” (Milosevic, 2012, p. 4).

As mentioned earlier, women from Jordan have been in peacekeeping missions. They have made a significant contribution in raising awareness on “violations committed against women and children”. They provided psychological counseling, medicine, medical care, and aid to the needy (Husseini, 2016). In addition, female participations in peacekeeping missions have had positive influence in the peacekeeping process in Guatemala and South Africa (Bertolazzi, 2010).

Women have played a significant role in West Africa in peacekeeping by providing a bridge between conflicts affected and ethnically divided societies. In Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast and Guinea Bissau, sustainable peace was made with an inclusive female participation (alaga, 2010). The Indian FPU became one example of a successful story of UN peacekeeping. They were able to contribute to the peace and security with the reorganization of both UNMIL and their home country. They reduced gender-based violence and maintained law-and-order. Traditionally, it was believed that only males could play this role in security. Women have proven to be able to reduce violence in a male-dominated society (Pruitt, 2016).

Gender Mainstreaming & UN Peacekeeping Missions

Gender mainstreaming is an essential mechanism in supporting peace operations, which acknowledge women’s rights and responsibilities. It analyzes opportunities and challenges in the context of “reform and reconstruction with respect to existing gender roles and equalities” (Bertolazzi, 2010, p. 9). It is a catalyst to understand the post-conflict situation and providing new initiatives for sustainable peace building (ibid). UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) have defined gender mainstreaming as: “The process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all spheres, so that women and men benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetuated.”

In supporting gender mainstreaming, powerful lessons have been learned from Cambodia. The UN Transitional Authority deployed male peacekeepers in 1992 and 1993. The mission did not get satisfactory results; rather they experienced an increasing rate of prostitution, sexual assault, and sexually transmitted diseases. The main duties of UN peacekeepers should have been keeping peace and security in the conflicting zones. However, there was no appreciable relationship between civilians and peacekeepers, and the peacekeepers were considered disrespectful. They were known as the Blue Helmets combatants who came to Cambodia for sexual involvement and 25% of peacekeepers have HIV positive on their return home (Crawford & Macdonald, 2013; DeGroot, 2001). The UN peacekeeping mission has many cases regarding abuses, but it is quite difficult to report most of these incidents, partially because of the absence of women peacekeepers.

The Security Council and secretary-general regularly acknowledge a pledge to ending “violence against and exploitation of women in conflict zones” (Crawford & Macdonald, 2013, p. 82). There are many cases of “exploitation and abuse of vulnerable civilian women by UN personnel” (p. 82) such as sexual exploitation and abuse in 2004 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. There are also uncovered stories of “sexual abuse and exploitation during operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Cambodia, Timor-Leste, West Africa, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the early 1990s through the mid-2000s” (pp. 82-83). In the wake of sexual abuse and exploitation by UN military personnel and civilian in the conflicting zones, in 2005 the Security Council and Secretary-General started investigations in “the comprehensive strategy to eliminate sexual exploitation during peacekeeping missions” (Crawford & Macdonald, 2013, p. 83). With respect to the initiatives, “UNSCR 1820 was adopted on 29 June 2008 as a reaffirmation of UNSCR 1325” that enforced a “zero-tolerance policy for UN personnel who sexually abuse or exploit civilians” (p. 84). However, reports have continued and the prosecution of peacekeepers committing abuses continues. Literature supports that an increasing number female peacekeepers could reduce exploitation, sexual abuse, and violence against women. They are more likely to address abusive incidents occurring during an armed conflict.

UN gender mainstreaming logic states that women have already demonstrated a better image of peacekeeping within local communities. Women are less aggressive and they can often “neutralize male aggression” (Crawford & Macdonald, 2013, p. 85), which could facilitate the victims to reconciliation and integrate into a peaceful society.

The role of the Indian Female Police Units (FPU) in Liberia

Before arrival of the Indian FPU

During the outbreak of armed insurgency in 1989 and a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2003, about 250,000 people died and more than one million people were displaced. During the conflict, the Liberian security forces were involved in looting and death troops and about one-third of Liberian women were raped (Kember, 2010, p. 23). After the ceasefire in August, the UN established UNMIL in September 2003 with 16,000 peacekeepers. Under the UNMIL observation of 2005 election, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf became President of Liberia (Kember, 2010). The President and UNMIL both prioritized control the high rates of sexual violence, however, due to weak security, corruption, unemployment, and illiteracy they could not bring control as they planned (Pruitt, 2016; Kember, 2010).

The Liberian National Police (LNP) started to reconstruct in 2004 by the help of UNPOL. But the public did not trust the LNP due to the brutality of police during the conflict (Kember, 2010). To build trust and responsible security, UNMIL and the Government negotiated in recruiting females into the LNP (15%), which was increased to 20% later. However, there were some obstacles to join the LNP including lack of high school education. The general conception of the job was only for males. Since 2005, UNPOL, UNMIL’s office, and various Liberian ministries worked together to develop a gender policy that created a high school equivalent course and some female oriented training for recruits in LNP. The initiatives aimed to encourage local women in joining the LNP and establishing a network of women to fight against gender biased violence. Despite the multiple initiatives and efforts, there was no real solution in security by 2007 (Kember, 2010).

The Indian FPUs mandates and their initiatives

The Indian First All-Female Police Unit (FFPU) was deployed in Liberia in 2007 and posted in a base in Congo Town of Monrovia. At the beginning, they were given specific tasks in guarding the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Monrovia, “providing security at local events, drug raids, riot control, and crying our patrols every night with member of the LNP and other UNPOL staff in and around Monrovia” (Kember, 2010, p. 28). However, they also started community-focused programs to empower local women and girls. The Unit’s strategy was to incorporate local women that make it easier to build trust and confidence between police and local communities (Pruitt, 2016; Kember, 2010).

The second Indian FPU was deployed in January 2008 in Liberia. In addition to their work, they developed community outreach projects to provide medical services, clean drinking water, and installed lights in public areas for nighttime. They taught self-defense, first aid, and Indian dance to the local female in the town’s Hebron Orphanage and Victory Chapel School (Kember, 2010). The third Indian FPU was deployed in February 2009 and started their work. The Indian Unit gradually advanced their community initiatives every year. The Unit started computer classes and provided education on sexual violence and HIV/AIDS. The unit affected the Liberian economy positively (Kember, 2010). The Unit focused on women and girls but also changed the perception of men. During the period, third FPU Commander, Annie Abraham was interviewed by Voice of America, 16 August 2009 and stated:

“We have changed their perceptions, and not just the perceptions of the Liberian women. We have also been able to change the perception of the Liberian men. They feel their women can do much more.” Finally, the mission was also able to collaborate with the communities for post-conflict reconstructions and the implementation of law and order, and empowering Liberian women and girls by providing their fundamental rights including education, employment and equal payment in the workplace (Pruitt, 2016).

Outcome of the Indian FPU in Liberia

After the deployment of the Unit in Liberia, the local people started to feel safe and secure. The unit was able to lower the crime rates in comparison to other places. Armed robbery was reduced by 65%, and while reported cases of sexual assaults have increased this is because the female level of confidence has risen, and they don’t have to hide. Female attendance at the victory Chapel School significantly increased.

“Following the school’s ‘adoption’ by the Indian Unit in 2008, the ratio of female to male pupils climbed to 7:3 - the opposite of the national average” (Kember, 2010, p. 33). In addition, the most significant achievement was that Liberian women were motivated to join the LNP and UN mission; some of them became police officers. Female recruitment in LNP remained high and increased every year to 10% of the LNP by mid-2008 and 13% by mid-2009 (Kember, 2010). The Unit was able to maintain law and order, and reform the strong police force (Pruitt, 2016; Kember, 2010). They began training of self-defense techniques, first aid and a hygiene policy, which became a crucial initiative (Milosevic, 2012).

Lessons learned from the Indian FPU

Initially, the Indian Unit was deployed for only for six months but later it was extended for a further six months and then annually renewed. But the media, donor countries, UNMIL, and others related to UN officials had undermined the Indian Unit. However, the Indian FPU had extensive skill of counter-insurgency and riot control in Jammu and Kashmir and central India. They professionally demonstrated their skills and conducted community outreach projects. The Indian Unit provided different types of training as a mentor among the LNP trainees such as behavioral modeling, verbal advocacy, leadership, community relationship, and professional security. Both FPUs and LNP launched joint foot patrols at night in high crime areas (Kember, 2010). The Unit has had a long-term effect in the reconstruction of LNP. The female unit was not only peacekeepers but also a unit that local people could easily interact with in schools, community programs, and in public areas. All in all, the unit was unique in Liberia (Pruitt, 2016; Kember, 2010).

There are numerous positive results from female contributions to peacekeeping missions. The UN has presented “the Indian unit in Liberia as a role model for women’s involvement in security” (Pruitt, 2016, p.57) as the best practice in peacekeeping missions, inspiring Liberian women. Ban Ki-Moon also noted “the conduct of the FPU served as an example of how the deployment of more female uniformed personnel can help the United Nations in its efforts to combat sexual exploitation and abuse” (2016). The Liberian President was impressed by the performance of the FFPU. She was proud of the Indian FUP’s professional performance in peacekeeping and empowering women (Pruitt, 2016).

Challenges: Women’s Participation in Peacekeeping Missions

Female participation in peacekeeping missions has a short history, so women have still to face many challenges ahead. Lack of training is a big issue of female peacekeepers. In addition, there are other factors that influence their participation and performance in peacekeeping mission such as dual responsibilities of work and family, lack of resources, and decent education.

Most developing countries’ female population faces dual responsibilities of work and family, which cannot easily allow them to join peacekeeping work. Most peacekeepers are from developing countries with more traditional norms in society. These factors discourage women to be self-dependent and establish their own identity. Too many females haven’t an adequate level of English language. This was found with the Serbian women’s peacekeepers, which should have fluency for peacekeeping missions (Milosevic, 2012). Lack of economic funding is another obstacle to increase gender mainstreaming. The United Nations Operations in Cote d’Ivoire (UNOCI) and the Namibia Plan of Action was underfunded in the gender unit (Bertolazzi, 2010).

Although UN has adopted different initiatives between 1948 and 2008, only seven women have been appointed as Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) and one in Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General (DSRSG). It was quite difficult to obtain such positions because of minimum requirements and complex procedures. In addition, still most of the UN member countries recommend male personnel for those positions. Lack of accountability in recruiting those positions, women are in an uphill struggle in achieving the higher positions (Bertolazzi, 2010).

Finally, a gender-balanced peacekeeping force has a short history that could be a barrier for women in getting higher posts of the decision making process in peace and security. Lacks of technical knowledge and good communication skills, women are facing many challenges to engage in peacekeeping mission. Also there is a lack of political will and many national policies in which women are not encouraged in the military (Alaga, 2010). Comprising all the facts the funding, understaffing, and limited resources have become major obstacles to implement gender-specific policies in peacebuilding processes.

Conclusion

I draw the conclusion that women peacekeepers are more compassionate and more sensitive than men. Either an inclusive participation in any mission or an all women contingent, their participation would be invaluable in establishing sustainable peace and security. Female participation in peacekeeping plays an important role in maintaining gender perspective. The presence of women in peacekeeping missions is especially beneficial for diverse cultures where women are prohibited from speaking to men and forbid public physical contact between opposite sexes. Within those communities, women peacekeepers are the better option. In addition, women are more empathetic and less aggressive. Since there is evidence of friction between male peacekeepers and locals, women peacekeepers are less likely to fight and should at least be included in the mission (Jennings, 2011). Since women have already demonstrated their professional capability in keeping peace with successfully completed mandates, the UN should continue to focus on women's involvement in peacekeeping.

Local women in conflict-affected areas are more prone to depression. Those women generally will not talk about their problems (especially sexual violence) to other people much less with male peacekeepers. In this regard, women could play a crucial role (States News Service, 2010).

Finally, the UN and some research agree regarding women's participation in peacekeeping –they conclude that both women and men are necessary in police, army, and all security sectors for sustainable peace (Pruitt, 2016; Milosevic, 2012; Kember, 2010). The UN has passed resolutions at least seven times since the year 2000, but much more remains to be done.

Recommendations

An in-depth study of Indian FPU activities and initiatives, and how they were able to produce better result in the conflict-affected society is a good start. How was the Indian Unit able to influence local people? What are the long-term effects of the Unit within the LNP? All of these questions and their answers could be helpful for the future of female participation. The UN should follow the Indian FPU's initiatives in post-conflict reconstruction that was formulated in Liberia, which includes community outreach programs such as Indian dance and other entertainment activities, self-defense practice, and computer classes.

The UN should increase the profile of female peacekeepers. The UN already has better practices in Liberia where the Indian FPU have improved all aspects of security training making them more capable to achieve their mandates. Female peacekeepers need additional training so that they can tackle all kinds of situations. The UN should share widely the lessons learned from the Indian FPU's experience in peacekeeping operations in Liberia. The Indian female police units commonly share their experiences with others in India after a completed mission, which fosters new initiatives.

It is essential to examine the contribution of female peacekeepers and their participation in UN missions, and formulate a specific inclusive policy. Women have already played a significant role in establishing peace and security, reducing sexual violence, and successfully completing given mandates within specific time frames. It is necessary to reduce sexual exploitation and abuse in conflict affected societies during conflict and post-conflict settings. To overcome these, it should be mandatory to implement a UN code of conduct within the peacekeepers including a zero tolerance policy, and gender-balanced peacekeeping force.

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