

Women and Peacekeeping: Time for the UN to Commit to Gender Equality

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UN peacekeepers are deployed to make local populations more safe and secure. They must not be allowed to become another source of insecurity for the people they are sent to serve. Christine Chinkin, Marsha Henry and Aiko Holvikivi on the need for the new UN Secretary-General to commit to gender equality in order to ensure that peacekeeping lives up to its promise.

It was confirmed that [the call](#) by numerous women's groups and campaigners to appoint a woman as the next Secretary-General of the UN would go unanswered when, on 5 October, the Security Council ambassadors [announced](#) that António Guterres would be the next person to lead the UN. The fact that we may have to wait another decade to finally see a woman in this position does not, however, mean that efforts to make the UN's work more gender equal should be placed on hold.

The campaign for a female Secretary-General revealed a growing demand for gender equality more broadly in UN management and activities. As High Commissioner for Refugees, [Guterres made remarkable progress](#) in increasing the share of women in senior leadership positions at the UN Refugee Agency. If he wishes to maintain the credibility of the organisation, and of himself, as an agent of peace and human rights, he must stand by this commitment to gender equality in his new role.

This commitment is sorely needed in UN peacekeeping, given the continued problems of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) in peace support operations. [SEA reporting](#) from 2014–16 shows that blue-helmeted peacekeepers have been committing acts of child abuse and exploiting women, girls and boys in internally displaced persons' camps in the Central African Republic and Mali. These acts are not merely a product of military masculinities and subcultures; rather they are indicative of the ways in which peacekeeping operations perpetuate a range of inequalities.

One response that the UN has highlighted is the presence of female peacekeepers. Seen as a panacea to SEA as well as providing a role model for local women, [the UN has encouraged](#) troop contributing countries to send more female personnel. Although countries such as India and Bangladesh *have* succeeded in deploying 'all female [squads](#)', consisting of around 100 militarised police women, the percentage of women military personnel still remains very low.



The Indian contingent of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), consisting mostly of women, arrives in Monrovia, Liberia, to begin its tour of duty, January 2007. UN Photo/Eric Kanstein.

In the absence of more female peacekeepers, [the UN has developed](#) training for peacekeepers as well as for local communities on the topic of SEA. Such training is a key tool to implement the organisation's zero-tolerance policy on SEA. However, many aspects of this training remain open questions, and ones that the UN must grapple with if training is to be taken seriously as a preventative measure.

Few would argue that more extensive training can definitively dissuade a would-be perpetrator from the more violent forms of sexual exploitation and abuse. However, what remains less clear is whether training can encourage reporting of abuse or cultivate a sense of responsibility towards the population the peacekeepers are meant to serve. Little evidence is available as to whether training can deliver on these goals, and if so, under what conditions, given that the quality, message and methodology of training that is carried out varies widely.

Even if SEA training were uniformly implemented and its methodology was successful in creating full awareness of prohibited behaviour and reporting mechanisms, as well as fostering a change in how peacekeeping personnel view their relations with the local population, the message of such training [is not uniformly considered desirable](#). Because the definition of SEA places violent assault and commercial sex in the same category of offences, training on the topic explicitly teaches peacekeepers that consent is irrelevant when it comes to SEA. Some commentators note that this simultaneously deprives local people – especially women – of any claims to agency in their own lives and trivialises sexual assault.

Another significant factor that undermines the credibility of peacekeeping is that while all UN personnel are bound by local law, the UN and its personnel have absolute [immunity](#) from the jurisdiction of national courts, ensuring that no prosecution can be undertaken in the host state. Discipline and legal proceedings – if warranted against wrongdoers – are the responsibility of the troop contributing country, but this is difficult when the evidence and witnesses are in the host country. Most frequently, the consequence – if at all – is that the wrongdoer is returned home, perhaps even to redeployment elsewhere. Nor is the UN informed of any subsequent action that might be taken.

After the introduction of its [zero-tolerance policy](#), the UN has made some progress in reducing the incidence of sexual abuse by peacekeepers, but lack of accountability and transparency continue to undermine confidence.

Renewed allegations of serious misconduct by peacekeepers in 2015, notably in the Central African Republic, led Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to [appoint a High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations](#) to review the issue and to establish a new position, a [Special Coordinator on Improving the United Nations Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#).

The Security Council also renewed its commitment to stronger measures against wrongdoers. In [Resolution 2272](#), adopted in March 2016, the Council endorsed the Secretary-General's decision to repatriate an entire military or police unit where 'there is credible evidence of widespread or systemic sexual exploitation and abuse by that unit'. Given the increasing number of peacekeeping operations and the difficulties facing the Secretary-General in finding adequate numbers of military and police personnel to fulfil Security Council mandates, this could be a stringent requirement.

Recent reports have made stronger recommendations focusing on direct UN action against accused individuals. For example, [the Global Study on the Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325](#) proposed a discussion with stakeholders to explore the feasibility of setting up an International Tribunal for Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by UN peacekeepers and UN staff in the field.

In order to demonstrate that he is a man capable of working for the security of all – including women – the new Secretary-General must devote attention to ensuring that peacekeeping really does make its intended beneficiaries more, not less, safe and secure. One way to do this is by taking seriously these recommendations for a more robust way of ensuring the accountability of those who commit sexual violence in abuse of their position of trust, and to secure justice for those who have suffered in this way.

But ensuring that the blue helmets do not themselves become a source of insecurity is only a starting point. In order to deliver on the organisation's promise of peace and security, the Secretary-General must take the myriad roles and expectations of women seriously, not only as victims of violence, but also as peacekeepers, combatants, peacemakers and human beings with certain inalienable rights and fundamental freedoms.

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