

Woman First, Soldier Second: Taboos and Stigmas Facing Military Women in UN Peace Operations

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Cover Photo: Female peacekeepers from South Africa on a MONUSCO patrol in Beni, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2018, MONUSCO.

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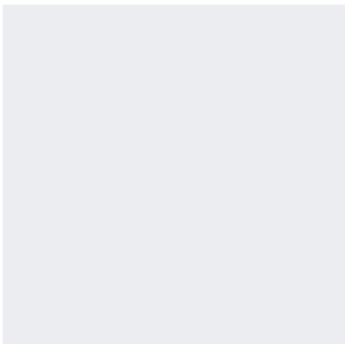
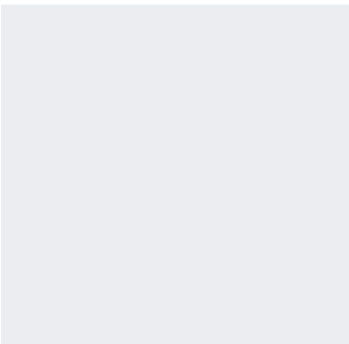
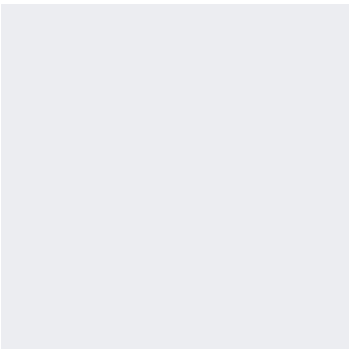
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ABBREVIATIONS

AU	African Union
DPO	UN Department of Peace Operations
FMOC	Female Military Officers Course
LGBTI	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex
MINURSO	UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara
MINUSCA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic
MINUSMA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MONUSCO	UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
OMA	UN DPO's Office of Military Affairs
UNAMID	UN-African Union Mission in Darfur
UNDOF	UN Disengagement Observer Force
UNFICYP	UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus
UNIFIL	UN Interim Force in Lebanon
UNMISS	UN Mission in South Sudan
UNMOGIP	UN Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan
UNTSO	UN Truce Supervision Organization
TCC	Troop-contributing country

Executive Summary

Despite efforts to increase the participation of women uniformed peacekeepers, military women continue to face taboos and stigmas that are barriers to their inclusion and successful deployment. The taboos and stigmas military women face are strikingly similar, regardless of their nationality, rank, or religion. Nonetheless, the extent to which they experience these taboos and stigmas is linked to cultural, professional, and personal factors. Some women are also disproportionately affected by these taboos and stigmas because of their ability, appearance, education, race, or sexuality.

Taboos and stigmas facing military women can be assessed at three levels: (1) at the individual and community levels; (2) within their national defense structures; and (3) during deployment to UN peace operations. At the individual and community levels, military women are often seen as less feminine and less marriageable. Single women may be seen as promiscuous, while mothers are often perceived as neglecting their families.

Within national defense structures, women's presence, appearance, and performance are assessed with greater scrutiny. Many feel that they are treated as a woman first and a soldier second; they are seen as weaker and in need of protection. Military women also often face hostility from colleagues who see them as receiving extra support. But at the same time, they face barriers in their careers due to the assumption that they will always prioritize their family over the military. One of the biggest challenges military women face is the taboo around speaking out over sexualized and discriminatory behavior. It is also taboo for women to speak about the inadequacy of military equipment that is designed for men.

Military women deployed to UN peace operations face an added layer of taboos and stigmas. The perceived lack of accountability in peace operations allows discrimination, inappropriate behavior, and sexual harassment and assault to flourish. In peace operations' multicultural environment, women also frequently encounter men who do not accept

women's leadership due to deep-rooted customs, beliefs, or mindsets. Moreover, there is a tendency to put women in "traditionally female" roles related to gender and protection, regardless of their qualifications. These challenges are all exacerbated for women of color.

Military women use a range of strategies to mitigate these taboos and stigmas, including sharing information with their family and friends, working harder to prove themselves, and avoiding certain situations. They also turn to informal and formal support structures, though most of these fall short, especially when it comes to addressing discriminatory and sexualized behavior.

To increase the pool of available, qualified female soldiers and officers and to enable them to successfully deploy to UN peace operations, both troop-contributing countries and the UN need to target the root causes and impact of the taboos and stigmas military women face. This requires direct and sustained involvement and commitment by leaders in the UN and national governments. It also requires hearing, including, and acting on the voices and recommendations of military women themselves, including the following:

- National defense structures should improve standards of behavior and accountability, educate men and women on taboos and stigmas, recruit and retain more women, proactively reach out to and select women for deployment to peace operations, provide women the support they need, and design equipment that better suits women's needs.
- The UN Department of Peace Operations should strengthen narratives on the importance of female peacekeepers, ensure all peacekeepers respect UN values, develop mission-specific gender strategies and plans, engage more firmly with troop-contributing countries, make recruitment and selection processes more gender-sensitive, hold personnel accountable for discriminatory and sexualized behavior, and establish in-mission support systems.

Introduction

Taboos and stigmas significantly impact the deployment of military women to UN peace operations.¹ Despite efforts to increase the participation of women uniformed peacekeepers, military women continue to face taboos and stigmas that are barriers to their inclusion and successful deployment.² Being confronted with persistent taboos and stigmas on the individual and community levels, as well as within national defense structures and UN peace operations, can have far-reaching consequences for military women before, during, and after deployment.

One military woman deployed to the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) described the environment many military women face in UN peace operations:

Despite the fact that I am used to the dynamics of a male-dominated environment through my national defense force, the sexism, shaming, and harassment of military women I witnessed and experienced in-mission went beyond any of my expectations. [While] some colleagues were very supportive, I was made to feel like a bad mother, my decisions were questioned and ignored on several occasions, and I witnessed multiple cases of inappropriate behavior that made me feel more unsafe within the “walls” of

Despite efforts to increase the participation of women uniformed peacekeepers, military women continue to face taboos and stigmas that are barriers to their inclusion and successful deployment.

the mission than outside. The lack of authority and women being a minority within the force made it very difficult to report and address these issues. Women who did speak up were often discouraged from making official complaints and were sometimes even bullied and isolated.

This paper discusses how experiences like this affect military women across all ranks, roles, and nationalities and perpetuate the underrepresentation of women military peacekeepers in UN peace operations. Compared to the civilian and police components of UN peace operations, the military component struggles the most to increase the participation of women.

This underrepresentation has been an ongoing challenge for the UN due to a combination of factors, including a lack of political will, inadequate financing and accountability, and resistance to gender equality.³ Core to this

imbalance are “external challenges stemming from policies and practices of Member States, as well as internal challenges within the UN Secretariat’s control.”⁴ These include challenges related to selection for deployment and negative deployment experiences, as well as household-level constraints.⁵ Social norms and biases reinforce these challenges by perpetuating gender inequality within national defense structures in general.⁶

This paper adds to earlier studies on logistical

1 Taboos refer to social or religious factors that create external perceptions of women that may lead to them avoiding deployment to peace operations. Stigmas refer to societal disapproval of women deploying to peace operations. When women do deploy, this may lead to them facing a lack of respect or negative opinions because they have done something society does not approve of.

2 Over the past two decades, the UN has sought to increase the number of women uniformed peacekeepers deploying to UN peace operations. Building on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and the ten subsequent Security Council resolutions on women, peace, and security, a number of initiatives have been undertaken to address the gender imbalance in UN peace operations. Recent examples include the Action for Peacekeeping initiative’s “Declaration of Shared Commitments on UN Peacekeeping Operations” and the UN Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy 2018–2028. UN leadership has reinforced these initiatives by emphasizing the importance of increasing the number of uniformed women in UN peace operations during countless strategic engagements. See, for example: Secretary-General António Guterres’s statement during the commemoration of the 2020 International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers. UN Secretary-General, “UN Secretary-General Remarks at the Gender Advocate Award and Dag Hammarskjöld Medal Ceremony,” New York, May 29, 2020. Furthermore, UN Security Council Resolution 2538 was adopted in August 2020 as a call to strengthen the collective efforts of the UN Secretariat, member states, and regional organizations to achieve women’s full, effective, and meaningful participation in peacekeeping at all levels and in all positions. See: UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (October 20, 2000), UN Doc. S/RES/1325; and UN Security Council Resolution 2538 (August 28, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES.2538.

3 Gretchen Baldwin and Sarah Taylor, “Uniformed Women in Peace Operations,” International Peace Institute, June 2020; and Kari M. Osland, Jenny Nortvedt, and Maria Gillen Røysamb, “Unity in Goals, Diversity in Means—and the Discourse on Female Peacekeepers in UN Peace Operations,” Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), June 2020.

4 UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO), “Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy 2018–2028.”

5 Marta Ghittoni, Léa Lehoucq, and Callum Watson, “Elsie Initiative for Women in Peace Operations: Baseline Study,” Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, 2018.

6 Sahana Dharmapuri, “Not Just a Numbers Game: Increasing Women’s Participation in UN Peacekeeping,” International Peace Institute, July 2013.

barriers by focusing on taboos and stigmas as key barriers to women's deployment to UN peace operations.⁷ The author interviewed 142 military women from fifty-three countries around the world for this study (see Annex).⁸ To assess how ranks and roles affected their experiences, these included women in ranks ranging from private to major general and who had previously been or were currently deployed to UN peace operations as contingent members, military observers, staff officers, or senior mission leaders.⁹ The author also had extensive conversations with member-state representatives and military women serving as UN officials at UN headquarters or who had deployed to non-UN operations, including for the African Union (AU) and NATO.

This paper examines taboos and stigmas that impact military women at three levels: (1) at the individual and community levels; (2) within their national defense structures before deployment to UN peace operations; and (3) during deployment to UN peace operations. Analyzing each of these levels separately allows for a clearer identification of areas that need to be addressed by troop-contributing countries (TCCs) and the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO). Reflecting the voices and perspectives of military women around the world, the paper discusses taboos and stigmas in detail and highlights strategies military women use to address these prior to and during their deployment. It also provides an overview of formal and informal support structures available to military women. It concludes with actionable recommendations for national defense structures and DPO on how to overcome these taboos and stigmas and the barriers to deployment they create, as well as suggestions for future research.

Taboos and Stigmas Facing Military Women

Military women experience striking similarities in the taboos and stigmas they face, regardless of their nationality, rank, or religion. Nonetheless, the extent to which they experience these taboos and stigmas is linked to cultural, professional, and personal factors, as well as the percentage of women within their national defense structure, specific service, and role. Some women are also disproportionately affected by these taboos and stigmas because of their ability, appearance, education, race, or sexuality. This section describes the taboos and stigmas military women face at the individual and community levels, within their national defense forces before deployment to UN peace operations, and during deployment to UN peace operations.

Taboos and Stigmas Facing Military Women at the Individual and Community Levels

Military women from all over the world experience taboos and stigmas at the individual and community levels, particularly when they consider deploying or have deployed to UN peace operations or other international operations.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the extent to which they face taboos and stigmas within their communities varies based on context-specific cultural dynamics and expectations.

Societal Perceptions of Military Women

One of the most common and sustained stigmas attached to women in the military is the perception

7 See, for example: Ghittoni, Lehouck, and Watson, "Elsie Initiative for Women in Peace Operations: Baseline Study."

8 These countries include Australia, Bangladesh, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Canada, Chad, Chile, Egypt, Fiji, Finland, France, the Gambia, Germany, Ghana, Greece, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Jordan, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Malaysia, Mexico, Moldova, Morocco, Nepal, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Niger, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Peru, Poland, Romania, Russia, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, Togo, Tunisia, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, the United States, Uruguay, and Zambia. The participants are currently or have been deployed to the following UN missions: the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), UN Multidimensional Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), UN-African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), UN Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP), UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP), UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), UN Truce Supervision Office (UNTSO), and UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).

9 The percentage of female peacekeepers in UN peace operations is small, and military women who deploy to these missions are a small community. Due to the highly sensitive nature of the content of the interviews conducted for this study, the author has done everything in her power to de-identify the interviewees. Disclosing the process through which interviewees were identified for this study would compromise the anonymity of the participants. For the safety of all women participating in this study, their anecdotes are linked to the UN peace operation they deployed to instead of their nationality.

10 When speaking about taboos and stigmas faced on the individual and community levels, women referred to issues they experienced in private settings or at home. These taboos and stigmas might have been held by family and friends, as well as by their cultural and religious communities.

that they are more man-like and less feminine than civilian women. “Communities see us as masculine, angry, and more aggressive than ‘normal’ women, as we are trying to fit in with a male-dominated culture,” said a woman deployed to the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA).

At the same time, most women who had deployed to UN peace operations noted that their communities were genuinely concerned for their well-being while they were on mission. As one woman who had deployed to the UN Truce Supervision Office (UNTSO) said, “Our communities tend to bubble wrap military women. We are well-trained soldiers and we are not fragile, but they still worry about us going on deployments because women are seen as the weaker sex.” Additionally, a woman deployed to the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) explained,

I come from a military family, and they were very supportive about my deployment; they saw it as something natural. However, my friends and neighbors were surprised and said it was a bad idea for a woman to leave her loved ones and the comforts of home to go on mission in a foreign country. They tried to discourage me by degrading my courage, strength, and capacity and said, “It is not a woman’s job”; “War is not for women”; “They will rape you”; “They will hurt you”; and “You are too beautiful to go to those places.”

Due to these perceptions, 108 out of 142 women interviewed said they often felt misunderstood and had to make a conscious effort to engage with their communities to try to correct these stereotypes.¹¹ Many women did not feel supported in leaving, and some even felt they had to justify their choice to their community. This erodes women’s support structures at home. Many did not feel they were able to talk to their community about the challenges they faced in-mission because they had to reassure them about their deployment in the first place. These women were forced to find their own solutions to their problems.

In most cultures, military women are expected to fill traditional gender roles such as taking care of the family and running the household. In many cases, these expectations, along with overt or unconscious biases, lead to communities shaming military women. Several women said that this shaming increased when they deployed to UN peace operations or other international operations, as “going away for an extended period of time falls outside of the general expectations of how a woman is supposed to behave and the role she is supposed to play within her community.”¹² Single women often face cultural and societal expectations to settle down and start a family and are questioned about their decision to instead focus on their career. These cultural and societal expectations are deeply heteronormative, and interviews indicated that queer military women are disproportionately affected by these stigmas.

Stereotypes Related to Women’s Sexuality

Taboos around being a woman in the military are often linked to stereotypes about women’s sexuality. As a military woman deployed to MONUSCO said, “When I went to the military academy, the comments around my decision were mostly based on wondering whether I was crazy, or if I was trying to impress someone. At the same time, I could see that my male counterparts were praised for their bravery, courage and for following their ‘call.’” Several women from various geographic regions described being seen as less desirable partners, in part because of their financial independence. As one woman deployed to the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) explained, “Being in the military makes us unmarriageable in the eyes of the community. According to societal beliefs, serving in the military makes us women untrustworthy and promiscuous because we become financially independent and are able to take care of ourselves. We are too independent to be able to be a good wife.” Some women experience neglect or even rejection by their communities for choosing a military career.

11 All figures included in this paper (e.g., x out of 142 women) reflect the number of women who explicitly talked about these issues during the interviews. The actual number of interviewed women who experienced these particular dynamics might be higher.

12 Interview with a military woman deployed to UNIFIL.

Of the 142 women interviewed, 86 described frequently being called “loose women” who engage in sexual relationships with their commanders for the opportunity to deploy and be treated favorably during their deployment. Such rumors negatively impact the image communities have of military women and in many cases lead to strained relationships and broken families. As one woman deployed to MINUSCA explained,

Women are supposed to stay home according to traditional beliefs and gender roles in our country. So when we deploy on a peacekeeping mission, the husband faces all kinds of rumors about his wife’s behavior in the mission area. She is shamed for leaving the family, and he is made to believe she is promiscuous. Most of us in the contingent are unable to travel home during our deployment. Then, when we finally return home after one year in the mission, we find that another woman has moved into our home and [taken] over our role. If you are lucky, she has cared for your children. If you are unlucky, the children have been abandoned and your bank account has been emptied, leaving you with nothing.

While some women felt that their families and communities were supportive, most experienced judgmental attitudes that led some to hesitate to deploy.

Several women deployed as contingent members shared similar experiences.

Expectations of Mothers in the Military

Regardless of the level of support they receive from their communities, military women from all fifty-three countries represented in this study experienced taboos and stigmas related to mothers deploying. All interviewees with children received questions or comments about their status as a mother when deploying or considering deploying.¹³

Unlike their male colleagues who are fathers, military women are made to feel like bad or negligent mothers at some point during their military career. They receive negative questions or comments from their communities, such as:

- “A good mother should stay with her children and never be away from them for extended periods of time”;
- “How can you abandon your children?”;
- “You are risking your life and you will traumatize your children as they fear losing you”;
- “Your children need you at home”;
- “She is a loose, untrustworthy woman who prioritizes financial benefits over her family.”¹⁴

This culture of shaming mothers who deploy indicates that gendered perceptions of women’s roles continue to stigmatize, and at times limit, military women worldwide.

For most military women who are mothers, this leads to “mother’s guilt,” imposes an emotional burden, and increases stress levels.¹⁵ While some women felt that their families and communities supported their deployment, most experienced judgmental attitudes. In several cases, this led them to hesitate to deploy. Referring to criticism from her family about her deployment, one woman deployed to MINUSCA said, “Family reasons were an important factor in my hesitation to deploy: how was it going to be possible for me to leave my children for a long period? These comments made me have doubts about my decision to come to the mission.” Several women said they faced an undue responsibility to make arrangements to placate these concerns or to reassure their family and community in a way that was not expected of their male colleagues who were fathers.¹⁶

¹³ Out of the 142 women interviewed for this research, 98 are mothers.

¹⁴ Interviews with military women deployed to MINURSO, MINUSMA, UNAMID, UNDOF, and UNMISS.

¹⁵ “Mother’s guilt” is a term that women use to describe their feelings about balancing societal expectations around caring for their children with their desire for a career when they are made to feel that their actions will damage their children.

¹⁶ For instance, many women explained that their male colleagues were not considered poor fathers for deploying, and their deployments were generally more accepted by communities at home.

Taboos and Stigmas Facing Military Women within National Defense Structures

Military women face a range of persistent taboos and stigmas within their national defense structures. This section explains the challenges these create for military women before deployment to UN peace operations and how they affect their experience during deployment, as well as their decision to redeploy.

Interviews conducted for this research indicated that taboos and stigmas are intersectional in nature. Professional factors such as education, training, skills, experience, and rank, as well as personal factors such as age, personality traits, confidence, mentality, sexuality, and race play an important role in the extent to which military women experience and are impacted by taboos and stigmas. In addition to these factors, power differences based on women's identities impact the way in which junior versus senior military women confront taboos and stigmas. While junior women spoke about being shamed or bullied in public, senior women experienced taboos and stigmas in more covert ways, including gossip behind their backs.

Women as Minorities in the Military

Being a minority in a male-dominated environment aggravates the taboos and stigmas military women face within national defense structures. The

women participating in this study explained that the actions of women are often more visible to others due to the low ratio of women to men in defense forces.¹⁷ Because of this, 128 out of 142 interviewees regularly felt like they were being put under a microscope simply for being a woman. They also felt that the baseline for performance was higher for them than for their male colleagues.

These dynamics create an environment where both men and women assess the presence, appearance, and performance of military women with greater scrutiny. Whereas some women try to band together, others face criticism from female colleagues who emphasize that they cannot afford to make mistakes. They see other women as “policing” them to demonstrate their membership in the larger male-dominated group. As one woman deployed to the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) explained, “Fellow military women are sometimes our worst enemy. We are all trying to survive in a male-dominated environment, and some women chose to do this by fitting in with the males through criticizing other women.”

Out of the 142 women interviewed, 57 compared their situation to other minority groups that have also not reached full acceptance in military organizations (see Box 1). Many pointed to the challenges faced by some racial and ethnic groups and by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) people in national defense structures. As one woman deployed to the UN Interim Force in

Box 1. What does it mean to be a minority in a military environment?

Being a minority in a military environment means that:

- You have to fend for yourself;
- You have to be hyper alert to stigmas and prove that you do not fit them;
- It is hard to speak up, whether on general issues or on minority-specific issues or stigmas;
- You have to face people who overtly discriminate on the basis of gender; and
- You have to face people who say offensive things.

¹⁷ For example, women represented 4 percent of the military forces in Latin America in 2010. In 2018, women's representation across all service personnel in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) region ranged from 2 to 17 percent, averaging around 10 percent. Marcela Donadio, “Women in the Armed and Police Forces: Resolution 1325 and Peace Operations in Latin America,” Red de Seguridad y Defensa de América Latina, 2010; and Susan Atkins, “Baseline Study Report: Women in the Armed Forces in the OSCE Region,” OSCE, July 2018.

Lebanon (UNIFIL) stated, “Being a minority in the defense force means you are expected to fend for yourself. Most women choose to keep to themselves, avoid standing out, and learn to ignore the stigmas out of fear [of being] ostracized when speaking up.”

Military women of all ranks appreciated the support they received from senior military women. However, some also highlighted that not all military women in senior ranks were supportive of the advancement of other women’s careers. Several said that senior women reacted jealously to their accomplishments, bullied them, or denied them the chance to participate in international peacekeeping trainings. Many women even indicated that senior military women within their national defense structures played an important role in maintaining the taboos and stigmas women face. For some women, addressing these taboos and stigmas is a taboo in itself. For example, interviewees claimed that instead of being open and honest about taboos and stigmas during public engagements, senior military women often belittled the challenges military women faced, and continue to face, within national defense structures. As a military woman deployed to the AU-UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) said,

More than one-third of the military women interviewed said their behavior and performance are often seen to represent all military women.

Our seniors have spent decades in these systems and have learned to survive and climb the ranks by fitting in with the males. To avoid jeopardizing their own careers some of them are very reluctant to speak about the sometimes grim realities military women face, and despite the fact [that] they have the best platform to address these issues, they remain quiet or say it is not so bad.

Nonetheless, most of the senior women interviewed said that they aimed to challenge overt or unconscious biases and gendered perceptions within their national defense structures. They also tried to give back during later stages of their career by mentoring junior female colleagues and participating in networks of military women.

Woman First, Soldier Second

Military women from all fifty-three countries included in this study experienced being perceived as a woman first and a soldier second within their national defense forces. Out of the 142 military women interviewed, 131 felt that they constantly needed to prove themselves in the face of questions over their ability to serve. These women were often perceived as weaker and more vulnerable than their male counterparts, and some were treated differently because of the belief that women are in need of protection. Military women saw this as directly impacting decisions to deploy them. Several women reported that their hierarchy was cautious to nominate military women for deployment to UN peace operations and would only do so if special safety considerations and measures had been taken by their national defense structures. As one military woman said about her deployment to a UN peace operation,

It was a challenging decision for some of the male hierarchy to deploy me, and I was specifically told that my deployment was being “considered at the highest levels” because of my sex. I asked if this was because I am a female, to which the

response was yes. I felt that more caution was taken with my nomination due to my sex than would have been for a male with equivalent knowledge, skills, and experience. What makes me need special safety considerations?

A military woman from another troop-contributing country (TCC) who deployed to a different mission said special permission for her deployment had to be requested from her national headquarters: “Often they would determine I should go [deploy] with another male colleague... for protection.”

These special considerations can significantly impact military women. Out of the 142 women interviewed, 51 explained that their behavior and performance are often seen to represent all military women. As a result, they are always on guard. As one woman currently deployed to a UN peace operation explained,

My performance is very important because I am one of the first female officers to be deployed on a mission, and my legacy will impact other female officers. If I do well it might open doors [for other women], but if I make mistakes this will have negative consequences for other female officers who want to deploy, so I have a lot of responsibility.

Out of the 142 military women interviewed, 124 said they worked harder to show that they were as capable and effective as men in the roles they filled. As one woman said, “I like to let my competence do the talking. I do often feel I need to prove myself as a female officer—I wish it could just be ‘as an officer.’”

Another consequence of this bias is that almost all of the women interviewed said that they were expected to suppress their femininity in order to be a more “typical” soldier or to match the leadership style and approach of male officers.¹⁸ As a result, 116 out of the 142 military women interviewed said they attempted to be more “man-like” and adopted “masculine” behavior to fit in with their male colleagues and meet their expectations. As a woman deployed to UNAMID said, “To be accepted in the military, women conform to the masculine environment. It’s all about survival.” A woman deployed to the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) added that “being in the military, we have to fit into a man’s world. To avoid being objectified, I make an effort to be more manly in the way I walk, talk, and look.” According to several senior military women, most men feel the need to assert their dominance over others, and many military women get sucked into doing this as well, especially when surrounded by men. These women emphasized that in a healthy working environment, women would not have to alter the way they lead just to be accepted and meet men’s expectations.

Many women also adapt the way they look to fit in with the masculine culture of their national defense structure. Women who do show their feminine

sides are often shamed. In some countries, military women who wear make-up are perceived as unprofessional. Military women said they feel self-conscious about looking too feminine and therefore avoid bright colors. Other women choose to discreetly wear colorful items “to maintain some of their own feminine identity.”¹⁹

These taboos and stigmas are particularly impactful during the early stages of military women’s careers. As one military woman explained, “In my days as a junior officer I would try and meet the mold to be more like the majority. I learned over time that being you, however that is, is the best way to lead. [Being] authentic to yourself... comes across [as] far more genuine than you trying to be like someone else.” Some women said their resilience and authentic leadership paid off and made them respected senior military officers. But others reported experiencing high stress levels due to these dynamics, leading some of them to face psychological and physical challenges that made them doubt their career path or question whether to deploy.

Prioritization and Discrimination in Deployment Opportunities

Several women interviewed for this study said that the push to deploy more women to UN peace operations put them in a difficult position. As one woman deployed to MINUSMA said,

Being openly pushed forward as a military woman can be an encouragement or a disadvantage, depending on the situation and support within the broader defense structure. For example, my [superior officers] encouraged me to deploy to reach the UN targets, after which my peers commented I had only been selected because of my gender and I had not actually earned my deployment.

Such comments are not uncommon in defense structures around the world: almost half of the women interviewed stated that they faced resistance, jealousy, and retaliation from male and

¹⁸ It is important to note that there are many forms of femininity, and how these are defined is socio-culturally dependent. This also means that suppressing femininity means different things to different women and takes different forms, depending on a woman’s national culture. Still, regardless of nationality, all of the women who raised these points used similar wording about being “more man-like and less feminine” in their behavior and appearance in order to fit in with their male counterparts.

¹⁹ Interview with a military woman deployed to MONUSCO.

female colleagues for receiving support from their leadership to progress in their career or deploy to a UN peace operation. For at least thirty-two women, this resentment led them to feel isolated and excluded or to be bullied by members of their defense force. In other cases, military women compete with each other to get on the radar of their leadership, which can impact cohesion and morale on the work floor.

While most military women would consider the offer to deploy to a UN peace operation to be an individual accolade or accomplishment, it can come at a cost when surrounded by questions about why they were chosen. Several women indicated that this dynamic was a barrier to their deployment as they wondered whether deploying would be worth the price they would pay within their national defense structure.

While some military women may be prioritized for deployment because of their sex, others are denied international deployments for the same reason. For example, in some cases the perception that women should be home with their family means that they are excluded from national selection processes for UN peace operations. Despite being interested in deploying, 28 of the 142 women interviewed reported that they did not receive information about deployments and available posts through their national hierarchy. They also reported not being nominated to participate in the international peacekeeping training needed to gain the knowledge and skills for UN deployment.

This is confirmed by the UN Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy, which states that “women are not aware of the employment opportunities with the UN and there is a lack of women role models.” Based on consultations with UN member-state representatives and female uniformed personnel, the strategy also notes that “women report that some Member States restrict deployment opportunities to male members through implicit or explicit gender bias.”²⁰ These findings indicate that

Women who have in the past turned down specific roles for family reasons often feel pressure to go on a deployment.

proactive and strategic communication targeting military women within national defense structures is needed to enhance their awareness of deployment opportunities and increase the participation of military women in UN peace operations.

Contrary to the experience of their male colleagues, many women have to actively seek information and are sometimes discouraged by their leadership from applying for deployment. Adding to that, according to the UN Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy, “UN prerequisites and job descriptions can include unnecessary qualifications or unconsciously gender-biased wording that limit applications from and deployment of women.”²¹ Several women were also told that unsuitable accommodations and inadequate healthcare for women in UN peace operations would make it unsafe for them to deploy by making them more physically and mentally vulnerable. They said that

their national hierarchy uses such statements, whether or not they are true, to prevent the deployment of military women.

In reality, military women deployed to various missions stressed that women military staff officers in particular have proper accommodations and that missions actively work to enhance living standards at military observer team sites. MINUSCA, for instance, has minimum standard conditions for team sites and only deploys women to these locations when the standards are met. Furthermore, women deployed to various missions confirmed that most level II hospitals are capable of dealing with women’s healthcare needs and have a gynecologist on staff. As a military woman deployed to MINUSCA affirmed, these healthcare resources should be adequate, especially since all peacekeepers need to pass a thorough medical clearance before they deploy.

A False Choice between Family and Career

While most military women reported that the acceptance of women within national defense

²⁰ UN DPO, “Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy 2018–2028,” p. 3.

²¹ Ibid., p. 4.

structures is increasing, they still face taboos and stigmas because of gendered perceptions of their role in the family. Fifty-three of the military women interviewed felt that they were forced to make a binary choice between a career in defense and a family. Many women who choose a military career are accused of not being committed either to the military or to their family, no matter what they do or how they show their priorities. Oftentimes it is assumed that they will always prioritize their family.

Mothers in particular face a culture of shame. Mothers in most countries are expected to be the main caretaker, creating stigmas for those who actively pursue a career in defense or deploy to peace operations. This can lead to paradoxical situations. Several women said that their superiors recognized them as promising officers, therefore giving them the opportunity to represent their country in UN peace operations, but that these same people criticized them for leaving their families.

At the same time, women who have in the past turned down specific roles for family reasons often feel pressure to go on a deployment. As one military woman mentioned, “When I was contacted about deploying for UNTSO, I felt that I had no other choice as I had used up my ‘credits’ [by] turning down other roles and that if I said no to the deployment, which involved a year away from my family, that I would no longer be offered any other opportunities to advance my career.” Many women are given the contradictory message that if they are mothers, they should stay home, but also that they need to deploy to maintain their career in the military.

This challenge is not restricted to mothers. As pointed out by Gretchen Baldwin and Sarah Taylor, “Essentialist expectations that women will have children might impact leaders’ decisions about whether to recruit or deploy them, regardless of whether they actually intend to have children.”²² Several women interviewed for this research were told that they were not given a position because the woman before them had gotten pregnant and left a

gap, “making women unreliable officers,” a deeply heteronormative and sexist assumption. These assumptions also fuel misperceptions about women’s performance and behavior during deployment. As a military woman deployed to MINUSCA explained, women may be expected to perform inadequately because they “would miss their families and friends too much and be distracted by concerns and sadness.”

Another factor that contributes to women not being taken seriously when pursuing a career in the military is that in some countries women have been legally excluded from climbing the ranks and serving a full tenure. Women are traditionally not able to achieve higher ranks and only allowed short service commissions. In these circumstances military women frequently feel that they are not being taken seriously by their male counterparts and often face exclusion. As one woman deployed to a UN peace operation said,

Our male colleagues do not believe we are serious about our career because women cannot be promoted beyond the ranks of major or lieutenant colonel within most branches of our defense system. [Our male colleagues ask,] why would we invest in a career if we do not have the perspective of becoming a general one day? They believe we are just there to pass time and so they ignore our presence or belittle us.

Discriminatory and Sexualized Behavior

The military women who were interviewed for this research emphasized that some of the biggest taboos and stigmas that need to be addressed are related to sexualized and discriminatory behavior, including sexism, racism, and sexual harassment and assault.²³ Out of the 142 military women interviewed for this study, 134 said they had experienced a large degree of sexism within their defense structures, regardless of their nationality. As a woman deployed to MONUSCO explained,

During my career, I had to face accusing and puzzling glances and phrases like “I don’t take

²² Baldwin and Taylor, “Uniformed Women in Peace Operations.”

²³ The UN defines sexual harassment as “any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favour, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature, or any other behaviour of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation to another, when such conduct interferes with work, is made a condition of employment or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment.” UN Secretariat, *UN Secretary-General’s Bulletin: Prohibition of Discrimination, Harassment, including Sexual Harassment, and Abuse of Authority*, UN Doc. ST/SGB/2008/5, February 11, 2008.

Box 2. Factors limiting the career opportunities of military women

- Women are judged for not following gender roles.
- Because of the assumption that women will follow gender roles, they are not offered deployment opportunities, which are critical to career advancement in the military.
- Women who are successful in the military are accused of having used sexual influence to achieve this or are criticized by other women and men.
- Women are not offered the same training opportunities as men.
- Women are disincentivized from having a military career, taking the actions required to make that career successful, and deploying.
- Career opportunities are judged according to male performance standards.

orders from women” or “I should be in the kitchen with my husband”... Today women [in my military] are somewhat more accepted. However, there are still senior and junior colleagues who prefer to work with men because they consider women to be very problematic or spoiled.

Military women also said they were commonly underrated or evaluated based on their sex. They indicated that they continued to be confronted with closed-minded attitudes about women in defense and the physiological differences between men and women.

In addition to facing stigmas related to being a woman in the military and “everyday sexism,” dark-skinned women and women from ethnic minorities frequently experience racism within their national defense structures. As military women from various countries explained, these women face double stigmatization and can be perceived as uneducated, angry, incompetent, and impatient because of their skin color or ethnicity. This points to the intersectional nature of the taboos and stigmas military women experience, and that these disproportionately affect certain women depending on factors such as their race and sexuality.

“Our male colleagues do not believe we are serious about our career because women cannot be promoted beyond the rank of major or lieutenant colonel within most branches of our defense system.”

Single military women reported that they were often believed to be available to engage in sexual relationships during deployments and were stigmatized within their national military structure because of this. To avoid isolation by their national colleagues during deployment, some single military women tried to befriend the spouses of male colleagues before their deployment to gain trust and show that they were not a threat. As underlined by Baldwin and Taylor, “This demonstrates how the burden of change often falls on individual women rather than on institutions.”²⁴

Many military women also reported facing accusations of engaging in sexual activities to advance their careers, which were often brushed off as banter. The sexualization of women is common in national defense forces around the world. As highlighted by Baldwin and Taylor, “Many leadership structures still ascribe to the heteronormative and misogynistic perception that women only bring their sexuality and gender identity to military contexts.”²⁵ One military woman said her commander told her, “It is hard to have women in the mission because where there are women, there is sex.”²⁶ As a military woman from another geographic region explained,

A woman in the military is either called a slut

²⁴ Baldwin and Taylor, “Uniformed Women in Peace Operations,” p. 5.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

²⁶ IPI roundtable, New York, October 2, 2019.

or a lesbian, no matter what she does. If she prefers to hang out with the guys, rumors that she is sleeping with them would start by default. If she is always with a woman, she is a lesbian. A military woman is never just a soldier, and she will always have a label put on her.

A military woman from a third geographic region shared this perspective:

Both at the community level and in our national defense structure, I have faced the misconception that to be a military woman you must have a certain profile, from being “easy,” to [a] tomboy, or even gay. “Girly” women are distrusted and perceived as opportunists or not as hard working... It all somehow leads to sexist jokes. I have been called all kind of things while wearing my uniform on the streets, especially the one with a skirt. I have had to ask many times to many superior officers to not make comments about my [physical] aspects or the way I look. So we are not supposed to be girly, but we have to endure the fact that we are girls. Not accepting the so-called “compliments” may transform you into a bitch.

“Women are considered weak by default in our system, and admitting we experienced sexual harassment or assault makes us even weaker.”

These accounts highlight sensitivities about perceived queerness in military organizations. Employing “lesbian” or “gay” as an insult is deeply homophobic. While all of these terms communicate danger to the military women receiving them, using queerness as an insult can erase LGBTI people by pushing them further into the closet. In

military structures, where it is rare to have conversations that are not completely heteronormative, this has far-reaching consequences.²⁷ This was confirmed by six queer women interviewed for this study.²⁸ While most of the women interviewed said they often spoke about their husbands with colleagues, none of the queer women had explicitly said they were in a same-sex relationship. Instead, they cover up their partnership status due to stigmas against queerness.

All of the military women who participated in this research had experienced or witnessed sexual harassment or assault within their national defense structure.²⁹ This points to the normalization of a sexualized culture within defense forces around the world. As one illustration of this, an external review

into sexual misconduct and sexual harassment in the Canadian Armed Forces found that “there is an underlying sexualized culture in the [Canadian Armed Forces] that is hostile to women and LGTBQ members,

and conducive to more serious incidents of sexual harassment and assault.”³⁰ The women interviewed for this research spoke of similar dynamics in their own national defense structures, pointing to examples ranging from sexual jokes and stories, comments about their bodies, and sexist remarks to unwanted sexual touching and rape. They also highlighted that the use of alcohol or drugs aggravated these dynamics and that excessive alcohol consumption was often involved in cases of sexual harassment and assault.³¹

Sexual harassment is often brushed off as “just one of those things women have to accept because they

27 The author thanks Gretchen Baldwin for her contribution to this point during the review process.

28 Six women spoke in confidence about being queer during interviews with the author. There might have been other queer women participating in the study who did not bring it up.

29 Confirming the seriousness of this issue within national militaries, the most recent US Department of Defense active-duty survey (2018) found an increase in the prevalence of sexual assault on women: it showed that 24 percent of women and 6 percent of men on active duty experienced behavior consistent with sexual harassment in 2017. See: Terri Moon Cronk, “DOD Must Do More to Prevent Sexual Assault,” US Department of Defense, July 29, 2020. In line with this, the Australian Broderick review found that “one in four women and one in ten men experienced sexual harassment in the Australian Defence Force” between 2007 and 2012. See: Australian Human Rights Commission, “Report on the Review into the Treatment of Women in the Australian Defence Force,” 2012. The 2018 Survey on Sexual Misconduct in the Canadian Armed Forces found that 28 percent of women in the regular force experienced at least one type of targeted sexualized or discriminatory behavior, compared with 13 percent of men. Seventy percent of regular force members had seen, heard, or experienced inappropriate sexualized or discriminatory behaviors in the military workplace or involving military members in the twelve months prior to the survey. See: Adam Cotter, “Sexual Misconduct in the Canadian Armed Forces Regular Force, 2018,” May 2019.

30 Marie Deschamps, “External Review into Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Harassment in the Canadian Armed Forces,” Canadian External Review Authority, March 2015.

31 This is in line with the findings of the review referenced in the footnote above.

are in the military.”³² Several of the women interviewed mentioned that they had witnessed military women perpetuating this idea and thus feeding into a taboo around addressing sexual harassment. Others said that they often refrained from speaking out when they witnessed or experienced discriminatory or sexualized behavior against women due to their strong sense of loyalty to the military.

As a minority, military women often feel that they are unheard, not taken seriously, or ridiculed when they raise issues related to discriminatory and sexualized behavior. Military women from nearly all of the countries represented in this research described their chain of command as ignoring or even condoning discriminatory or sexualized behavior. The resulting lack of trust or confidence in official complaint systems often prevents military women from speaking out or starting an official investigation, particularly in cases of sexual harassment and assault.³³ As a woman deployed to MONUSCO commented, “There is an office in charge of preventing and investigating harassment or abusive conducts within my national defense force, but as I see it, they lack the reliability of being taboo/stigma free. I perceive that there is always some assumption that women somehow put themselves in that situation.” Many interviewees raised similar experiences and said that reporting systems are weak or nonexistent. The lack of military women in leadership positions has also deterred military women from reporting these issues.³⁴

This culture of silence is reinforced by a fear of negative consequences for bringing a complaint, including retaliation, negative career repercussions, stigmatization, and ostracization. Several women stated that they were frozen out of future promotions and deployments when they reported such behavior. Others experienced re-victimization when speaking up about sexual harassment and assault. As one woman explained, “Women are

Discriminatory and sexualized behaviors are among the main reasons why women do not deploy to UN peace operations.

considered weak by default in our system, and admitting we experienced sexual harassment or assault makes us even weaker. And if the perpetrator was not a ‘bad guy’ but just a regular colleague, the shame to speak out is even greater.” As a result, there are countless military women who have never reported the sexual harassment and assault they witnessed or experienced.

Many women stressed that discriminatory and sexualized behaviors are among the main reasons why they do not deploy to UN peace operations. In some cases, they have also led to women resigning from the military. This indicates that there is still a long way to go to effectively address such taboos and stigmas within national defense structures.

Equipment Made for Men

Another challenge that military women raised was the inadequacy of their military equipment, which remains taboo for women to speak up about. Of the women interviewed, 109 out of 142 raised the issue of ill-fitting equipment. They reported that only their ceremonial uniforms, which are seldom worn, are tailored to fit the female body. Their combat uniforms and equipment such as body armor are meant to be “unisex,” at least on paper, but in reality “unisex” equipment is designed based on male anthropometric data. Countries traditionally have only one type of combat uniform and limited types of body armor available to their personnel. Women are simply issued smaller sizes of male equipment, which fails to take into account their different dimensions, centers of gravity, and ratios of measurement and strength (e.g., being stronger in the legs versus the arms, having a different pelvis tilt, and having a different ratio of torso to height). As a result, equipment is often too large or too tight to fit women’s body shapes and measurements.

Wearing unisex or ill-fitting equipment is not only uncomfortable but also limits women’s functionality and capability and impacts their safety. For example, it might not protect women’s reproduc-

³² Interview with a military woman deployed to MONUSCO.

³³ See, for example: US Department of Defense, “2019 Military Service Gender Relations Focus Groups: Active Duty,” April 30, 2020.

³⁴ This was reinforced by the sense that some women in leadership are less likely to speak up due to the reasons explained earlier in this section.

tive organs. Ill-fitting gear including helmets and body armor can lead to both repetitive-load injuries such as stress fractures and immediate injuries such as bruising. Apart from safety issues, inappropriate equipment can limit women’s agility and performance, which may undermine their credibility in all settings.

The use of “unisex” uniforms also impacts women’s hygiene. As one military woman pointed out, when women do not have access to toilets while on operations, it is difficult for them to urinate discreetly due to the design of their uniform. In some cases, women need to remove their armor or bare a considerable amount of their body to urinate in the field or on an aircraft. Since the uniforms are not tailored to their needs, some women have taken the initiative to alter their own uniforms by placing Velcro in the crotch area so they can avoid taking them off in public to urinate. Because these are personal initiatives, such solutions are not widely available.

Wearing “unisex” or ill-fitting equipment is not only uncomfortable but also impacts women’s safety, hygiene, and mobility.

Several countries have recognized these challenges and are working to adapt equipment to different body measurements and types, including through adjustable backpacks and uniforms that start at smaller sizes. Some countries also provide an allowance to pay for uniform adjustments, but usually only for clothing rather than highly technical equipment such as body armor or helmets. In some countries, women also receive an allowance to buy high-impact sports bras, but women in other countries receive no support.

Despite these initiatives, most women who participated in this study acknowledged that it is still taboo to address these structural issues, and many had frequently been ridiculed for the way they looked in uniform and the way the equipment

restricted their movement. Due to this taboo, as well as a lack of confidence that defense structures will address equipment challenges, most military women said they decided to keep quiet. As a military woman deployed to the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) said, “Nothing changes anyway, and it will just create another reason to make fun of us.”

Taboos and Stigmas Facing Military Women in UN Peace Operations

All of the women interviewed for this study reported experiencing some form of taboo or stigma during their deployments to UN peace operations. This indicates that these issues affect military women across ranks, roles, and nationalities. Military women on deployment experience an additional layer of taboos and stigmas on top of what they already experience in their national defense structures. These can affect military women’s deployment experiences and their decision to redeploy and therefore have a direct impact on efforts to deploy more military women to UN peace operations.

Discrimination in a Context of Impunity

Of the women interviewed for this study, 113 out of 142 said that they faced additional scrutiny during deployment beyond what they already faced in their national defense structure.³⁵ This scrutiny was often linked to the “common perception that women are incapable, vulnerable, and weak.”³⁶ As in national military structures, one of the most common stigmas raised in the context of UN peace operations is that military women are considered a “woman first, soldier second.” A military woman

³⁵ Despite efforts to increase the participation of uniformed women, progress has been slow, particularly regarding the deployment of women military peacekeepers. In 1993, women represented only 1 percent of uniformed personnel deployed to UN peace operations. By 2013, thirteen years after the adoption of Security Council Resolution 1325, military women still only represented 3 percent of all military personnel deployed to UN peace operations. Recognizing this as a critical challenge, the UN recently boosted its efforts to increase these figures and set the target of 25 percent women military observers and staff officers and 15 percent women serving in military contingents deployed to UN peace operations by 2028. By August 2020, military women represented 18.4 percent of all military observers and staff officers and 4.8 percent of contingent members. Sahana Dharmapuri, “Not Just a Numbers Game: Increasing Women’s Participation in UN Peacekeeping,” International Peace Institute, July 2013; Pablo Castillo Diaz, “Military Women in Peacekeeping Missions and the Politics of UN Security Council Resolution 1325,” September 2016; UN DPO, “Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy 2018–2028”; UN, “Uniformed Women in Peacekeeping,” December 31, 2019, available at https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/uniformed_women_infographic_150520_updated.pdf; and UN, “Operational Effects and Women Peacekeepers,” August 2020, available at https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/operational_effects_and_women_peacekeepers_august_2020.pdf.

³⁶ Paraphrasing military women from various countries who deployed to MINUSCA, MINUSMA, MONUSCO, UNAMID, UNDOF, UNIFIL, and UNMISS.

deployed to the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) described finding this stigma to be particularly acute in peace operations:

I found this more so in the UN than anywhere else. I have never been more reminded that I am a female, and that I am a female first before a military officer. I find that really hard.... It is irrelevant what my gender is. So I try to lead in a way that [lets] people see me as a good leader and a good military officer and just disprove any preconceived perceptions they have about [me] that I am less than my male counterparts.

As a senior woman deployed to UNMISS said, “Military women have to convince others they can do it, where [it is assumed] men... can do it, even if they can’t.”

Military women in UN peace operations are also often treated as non-equals: 136 out of the 142 women who participated in this research reported discriminatory behavior and sexism. Several women were belittled by their male counterparts, receiving comments like “Are you going to cry now?” Military women also mentioned that they or their female colleagues were given unequal or limited opportunities because of their sex, often because of a lack of trust and acceptance. This behavior was often believed to stem from bias and discriminatory practices in TCCs, which many women felt were exacerbated in-mission due to the perceived absence of leadership and accountability in UN peace operations. As a woman deployed to MINUSMA commented, “The sense of impunity in-mission made men feel like they could do whatever they wanted and there was no holding back with regards to sexist comments.”

Of the military women interviewed for this study, 83 out of 142 said they experienced bullying, isolation, and exclusion during their deployment, whether within their contingent, at military observer team sites, or at force or sector headquarters. This took place in social contexts as well as in the workplace. Several women said they were excluded from working groups, meetings, and briefings, which undermined their work. As one woman deployed to MONUSCO explained, “Most males in mission follow a pack-dog mentality, which makes it difficult to address taboos and stigmas because women face the risk [of being]

singled out, isolated, bullied, and are in some cases even repatriated for speaking up.” For some, this had serious psychological and physical consequences, and in some cases it led to hospitalization. One woman explained the impact this had on her:

I am feeling tired of always being as on trial, having to work harder for the same, or sometimes less, amount of respect, having to somehow “educate” your superiors on gender equality matters, which could lead to depression, frustration, and, in my case,... early arterial hypertension, probably due to stress.

Both male and female military colleagues can play a role in these dynamics. As described by a military woman deployed to MINUSMA, “When you show you are trained, intelligent, and aspirational, some senior female military officers would perceive and treat you as a threat, excluding you from certain areas of work.”

Cultural Differences over Women’s Leadership

Many military women reported that their male colleagues in UN peace operations resisted women’s leadership and refused to take orders from women. They described frequently encountering men who did not accept women’s leadership due to deep-rooted customs, beliefs, or mindsets. This is a particular challenge for female staff officers at force headquarters. As one woman deployed to UNMISS said,

The majority of women officers at force headquarters were deployed as administrators and they were not permitted to take up different types of roles. Many of the male officers within force headquarters were unfamiliar with the idea that women would take up different and more senior roles, which meant that some found it initially challenging for women to be in those roles.

Several women who deployed to UN peace operations in more senior ranks (lieutenant colonel and above) were challenged by male counterparts of other nationalities. Women working in the operations and plans areas (3 and 5 functions) faced particular challenges. As a woman deployed

to UNMISS stated, “Several male colleagues refused to accept my leadership. Within their cultural frameworks, it is uncommon for women to serve in my position and they were uncomfortable serving under a woman leader and taking my orders.” Several military women said they had to order personnel from some TCCs not to call them “sir” and to use the correct title, “ma’am,” instead.

Women contingent members struggled with similar dynamics from their national colleagues during deployments. As a woman deployed to MONUSCO explained,

Once deployed, although my biggest fears were about not fitting in [in] the deployment area or having to accept cultural differences that would test my leadership with community members, it was sadly surprising that the people having second thoughts about my decision-making skills were always from my own contingent, especially some chiefs that I suppose would think that the respect I received from UN staff members and community members was inspired by some kind of physical attraction instead of by my accomplishments and my hard-working attitude. One of my commanders even referred to me and another female officer as “the cherry on the cake” when “advising” [us] to be careful on how we treated our subordinates.... Female leadership is always under scrutiny.

Nearly all of the women interviewed reported facing discriminatory behavior and sexism while they were deployed to UN peace operations.

Gender Stereotypes and “Traditionally Female” Roles

Taboos and stigmas related to gender stereotypes also remain widespread in UN peace operations, adding further stress to women already working in challenging environments. As in their national defense structures, women with children are often made out to be bad mothers. Women, especially single women, are believed to be available and seeking sexual relationships during their deploy-

ment. Some women serving as contingent members said their colleagues had sent photos or videos of them dancing during cultural and social events in the mission to their families or friends back home, which created rumors about their sexual behavior and strained their relationships.

Several military women also described the tendency for women to be appointed to roles focused on gender and protection, such as gender and protection advisers or focal points at a mission’s force or sector headquarters. In many cases, women felt that they were appointed to these

roles by virtue of their sex even though they had not been trained to perform such tasks.

Putting women in roles they are not trained for sets them up for failure and reinforces the stigma that women are

incapable of successfully serving in UN peace operations. Several military women stressed that “being a woman does not make you a gender expert.” As a military woman deployed to UNIFIL said, “For us to succeed, the UN needs to ensure that women do not get the job just because they are women. They must have the right skills and experience for a role, otherwise they are being set up to fail.” Several women spoke about tokenism, saying that TCCs pay lip service to the UN by deploying women to meet targets without preparing them for their deployment through training or other support.³⁷

Putting women in “traditionally female” roles is highly problematic. It confirms negative stereotypes about the roles women are suited to perform. It also leads to gender and protection being considered “women’s issues.” This frustration was shared by women deployed to each of the UN peace operations covered in this study. Several military women who served in these positions said they experienced double stigmatization and were continually belittled because of their role, with colleagues saying, “I don’t really get your job. It’s just women’s stuff.”³⁸ To overcome this stigma,

37 Issues related to tokenism are also highlighted by Sabrina Karim and Kyle Beardsley, “Female Peacekeepers and Gender Balancing: Token Gestures or Informed Policymaking?” *International Interactions* 39, no. 4 (2013); and Natasja Rupesinghe, Eli Starnes, and John Karlsrud, “WPS and Female Peacekeepers,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Women, Peace, and Security*, Sara E. Davies and Jacqui True, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

38 Interview with a military woman deployed to MONUSCO.

many women participating in this study argued for the appointment of both women and men to these positions and for inclusion of male gender and protection advocates within mission leadership.

Nonetheless, some military women experience positive impacts from gender stereotypes. For example, several women mentioned that by contributing to peace operations' community engagement activities, they were able to build trust in and increase respect for the mission and came to be seen as valuable additions to their team or unit. As a woman deployed to UNMISS described,

I felt that I was able to add a great deal to local patrols and engagements by being a woman. I was able to have conversations with very high-ranking generals from both warring factions and ask more personal questions about family, etc., which is more "accepted" from a woman. This supported intelligence gathering. I was a female face on the ground, and this allowed the women and children who were being targeted to have more trust in the patrol.³⁹

Many women experience being at the mercy of senior male colleagues, as the UN is perceived as not having the authority to intervene and act on sexual harassment and assault.

Sexual Harassment and Assault

Military women deployed to UN peace operations face the persistent belief that they need to be protected from external threats because their sex makes them weaker and more vulnerable.⁴⁰ However, women deployed to UN peace operations did not feel weaker or more vulnerable to external threats. Instead, they reported being more concerned about sexual harassment and assault within the mission.⁴¹ This was also the case for many women who had deployed with the AU, NATO, and other operations. This indicates that military women are confronted with structural challenges related to misconduct during interna-

tional deployments.⁴² As a woman deployed to MONUSCO said,

I am a well-trained soldier, and I have no concerns about handling challenging situations on patrols. What I am worried about is the dynamic in the mission. There are many stories about sexual assault within the walls of the mission, and even if this is not officially addressed by our hierarchy, women warn each other when they return from mission.

The normalization of unwanted sexual advances in missions is alarming, as illustrated by a military woman deployed to UNFICYP: "You got the normal things; you get hit on as though you are up for sex, everyone was thinking that you are free.

You just bat that away, that was always annoying." Because of this, several women said their partners or families did not want them to deploy.

As a result of the myriad cultures represented in UN peace operations, several women deployed to various missions said it was not uncommon for male colleagues to "interpret empathy and friendship as an invitation to hit on their female colleagues, or worse."⁴³ This often resulted in unwanted sexualized behavior, including sexual jokes or stories, sexual touching, and, in some cases, rape.

Military women emphasized that these dynamics were present at all levels within UN peace operations and frequently involved colleagues in senior positions. As explained by a military woman deployed as a senior officer to a UN peace operation, "People exploit the UN atmosphere; they take advantage of their role, their power, the environment they are in, and the feeling of impunity, which is often validated."

³⁹ The inclusion of women in community engagement is vital, yet it is important to highlight that it is problematic when women are only valued for when they are acting "as a woman" in a female-gendered role, versus as a soldier or officer.

⁴⁰ This "gendered protection norm" whereby women are perceived as needing protection and men are seen as protectors is also described in Sabrina Karim and Kyle Beardsley, *Equal Opportunity Peacekeeping: Women, Peace, and Security in Post-Conflict States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁴¹ When discussing these issues during interviews, many women spoke about how widespread sexual harassment and assault is within both their national military and other militaries. Women emphasized that this impacted the image and expectations they had of certain TCCs, and they prepared themselves accordingly by keeping extra distance from individuals or contingents deployed by these TCCs.

⁴² Based on interviews with military women held for the purpose of this study.

⁴³ Interview with a military woman deployed to MINUSCA.

Many women experience being at the mercy of senior male colleagues, as the UN is perceived as not having the authority to intervene and act. Whereas women deployed as staff officers and military observers often face sexual harassment or assault from male colleagues of different nationalities, women contingent members experience these dynamics within their units as well. As described by a woman contingent member deployed to MONUSCO,

Many times, when superiors get the chance, they select women for the contingent not because of their capacity but because of their physical traits. At the moment of selection, the tall, blond, and skinny female will have priority over the chubby [one], [even if] she is an excellent soldier.⁴⁴ Once they arrive in the mission area, the beautiful women become the target of conquest for the superiors. In my case, my superior started to harass me and said I was a special officer that made him crazy with love and that the mission could pass excellently [if I engaged in a sexual relationship with him]. He pushed his private parts against my leg, and I was disgusted by the situation. When I told him the next day how bad it made me feel, he advised me to think carefully if I was going to report him because he was a colonel of great respect, and I was just at the beginning of my military career. For the rest of my mission [seven months], I was given a disciplinary sanction every day. I did not know how to defend myself, and I ended up getting sick from the indirect sexual persecution through sanctions, prohibitions, and excessive control. I felt lonely and depressed, wishing that hell would end.

Women contingent members from various geographic regions shared similar experiences of leaders using sexual intimidation. They also

indicated that poor leadership by contingent commanders increased misconduct within contingents, likely due to a sense of impunity.

The perceived lack of accountability and the resulting sense of impunity in UN peace operations allows inappropriate behavior and sexual harassment to flourish.⁴⁵ Out of the 142 women who participated in this study, 134 said they had experienced, witnessed, or heard about cases of sexual harassment and assault in UN peace operations on several occasions. Most of them decided not to speak out due to a lack of trust that the UN system, the mission, or their national leadership would appropriately address the issue, as well as shame, re-victimization, and fear of reprisals.⁴⁶ As explained by a military woman deployed to MINUSCA,

UN efforts mainly seem to focus on addressing the external aspects of [sexual exploitation and abuse] that involve the local population, but I found that internal misconduct is often neglected or covered up.⁴⁷ Women are implicitly and explicitly discouraged [from reporting] sexual harassment within the mission, and I know of several cases where women were threatened to be repatriated.

As a woman deployed to MONUSCO added, “The decision makers have to be prepared for the possible obstacles of those not willing to change the way things are done, and they need to be firm and relentless. I’ve seen some awful cover-up myself. I will always remember it as the worst experience on my UN mission.” Countless women discussed similar experiences, indicating that the response of the UN and TCCs to allegations of sexual harassment or assault in missions is often inconsistent and inadequate.⁴⁸ As a woman deployed to UNMISS said, “There is a lot of talking about these issues, but the UN needs to act according to what they say.”

44 Interviews conducted for this research suggest the use of body-shaming language against women is common in defense structures across the world.

45 Some military women who had deployed on various types of international operations emphasized that they faced similar dynamics in other contexts too, stating that their experiences were downplayed or covered up to preserve political engagement and good diplomatic relationships with other nations. Women deployed on humanitarian missions have experienced similar dynamics. See, for example: Jasmine-Kim Westendorf, *Violating Peace: Sex, Aid, and Peacekeeping* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2020).

46 The UN Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) investigates misconduct allegations that involve personnel in peacekeeping missions, among other UN entities. According to OIOS, TCCs have the primary responsibility to investigate their military personnel. UN OIOS, “Investigations Manual,” 2015.

47 The UN distinguishes between external sexual exploitation and abuse and internal misconduct, which includes discrimination, sexual harassment, and assault.

48 This confirms findings of other studies on sexual harassment and assault involving peacekeepers. See, for example: Westendorf, *Violating Peace*.

The risk of sexual harassment and assault impacts both the experience of military women during their deployment and their decision to redeploy. As highlighted by the Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy, “Women may be worried about being isolated and vulnerable to sexual harassment and exploitation when deployed.”⁴⁹ This was confirmed by many women interviewed for this study. As a military woman deployed to UNMISS said, “The creepy behavior of male colleagues was the worst part of my mission and the main reason not to deploy again.” Her experience was echoed by several other military women.⁵⁰

Racism: A Second Layer of Stigmatization

Racism toward military women is widespread in UN peace operations. As with sexism, this often goes unaddressed due to the absence of authority in missions. Out of the 142 women interviewed for this study, 122 mentioned that they had experienced or witnessed racism during their deployment to UN peace operations. This adds a layer of stigmatization for women of color, who frequently receive insulting comments and may be openly considered “less educated, less trained, and less able to do the job” unless they prove these perceptions wrong. As a woman deployed to a UN peace operation explained, “I was ignored and treated badly because of my skin color. When I tried to make suggestions to improve our work I was laughed at. They said, ‘What does a little Black girl like you know?’”

None of the women who experienced racism in-mission received support from leadership to address these matters, and they underlined the need for a firmer stance by the UN. As a military woman deployed to MONUSCO said,

The UN needs to be far more firm on what is and what is not ok, and demand that TCCs are briefed on standards of behavior and held accountable when these are violated. A culture

of accountability and responsibility needs to be formed across the entire mission, [one] that demands people... act respectfully across all ethnicities and genders.

Mitigation Strategies and Support Structures

Military women from all fifty-three countries represented in this research spoke about a range of mitigation strategies and support structures they used to overcome the challenges posed by taboos and stigmas.

Mitigation Strategies

Individual women use strategies to mitigate the taboos and stigmas they face both before and during their deployment to UN peace operations.

Strategies to Prepare for Deployment

Prior to their deployment, military women use various strategies to mitigate the impact of taboos and stigmas. For example, they ensure support systems are in place for their spouse and family when they are deployed. For many women, this is relatively easy. As one woman deployed to MINUSCA mentioned,

More than half of the women interviewed said they experienced some level of bullying, isolation, and exclusion during their deployment.

When I deployed for six months, everyone was feeling sorry for my husband. How could his wife leave him and the kids alone? Neighbors, friends and family lined up to take care of them in my absence and brought them dinner almost every night. For the record, when he deployed for twelve months, that was considered completely normal, and I had to cook our dinner myself.

Women from all over the world brought up similar experiences, pointing to the differences in community support for military women versus men.

Most women ensure they have good communica-

49 UN DPO, “UN Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy 2018–2028.”

50 This is in line with the findings of other studies. See: Karim and Beardsley, *Equal Opportunity Peacekeeping*, pp. 126–127; and Ghittoni, Lehouck, and Watson, “Elsie Initiative for Women in Peace Operations: Baseline Study,” p. 36.

tion networks in place during their deployment to connect to family at home and avoid further stigmatization because of their absence. To manage views and expectations, many of the women interviewed also actively share information about their deployment, with some taking their family and friends to their military organization to learn more. Several women also said they engage directly with community members when they are confronted with taboos and stigmas. As a woman deployed to MONUSCO mentioned,

When possible, I would ask those people saying or acting in a way that reveals some stigma or taboo if they would say or do such things if I was a man too. I try to explain that my motivation to deploy comes from the same place as men’s motivations. I can’t really say if it’s effective, but at least most of them nod and apologize.

Several women stated that taboos and stigmas decreased after their first successful deployment, making it easier for them to prepare for their next mission.⁵¹ As one woman deployed to MONUSCO stated, “When I deployed the second time I received greater understanding from my family and the community. As my first deployment had been successful, they had more confidence in me and understood why it was important [for me] to deploy.” However, other women indicated that the taboos and stigmas they faced were persistent. As a mitigation strategy, many of them decided to ignore or accept these taboos and stigmas, whereas others worked to prove themselves and make their communities proud. As one woman deployed to MINUSCA said, “Deployments build your character. You live with this stigma for a long time, and you end up making it part of you, until it does not bother you anymore. Then the community ends up respecting you, and some end up admiring you.”

To protect themselves and their professional relationships in mission, many military women decide to isolate themselves and avoid social functions during their deployment.

Strategies during Deployment

Many military women participating in this study said they feared speaking up to address the taboos and stigmas they faced during deployment, especially when they were deployed in more junior roles. Women deploying as contingent members also said they lacked institutional support to address taboos and stigmas and often refrained from raising complaints with people they would need to continue working with after their deployment. Because of this reluctance to use official channels, many military women resort to informal strategies to mitigate the impact of taboos and stigmas faced in-mission, which vary depending on their age, rank, and role.

All interviewees deployed to UN peace operations said they worked harder than their male counterparts to prove themselves, trying to deconstruct the perception that female peacekeepers are less capable, weak, and vulnerable. Military women

explicitly said they tried to show the best version of themselves by being professional, ethical, and confident and treating all ranks with respect.⁵² Some publicized their work and activities to

showcase their achievements. Depending on their seniority and the mission dynamics, some women also more directly confront those holding taboos and stigmas, as illustrated by a woman deployed to UNFICYP: “You challenge them. You challenge them in their thinking, you challenge how you can contribute, reconfirming you are there to support.” Senior military women reported that being authentic leaders helped them overcome taboos and stigmas during their deployment.

While all women expressed frustration with the need to prove themselves, some tried to see this challenge in a positive light. They reminded themselves “to always keep in mind that we are an example and role models for other women, so our

51 Out of the 142 participants, 73 deployed on multiple international operations: 27 stated that taboos and stigmas decreased after their first successful deployment and 46 stated that the taboos and stigmas they faced were persistent. It is important to note that whether women are able to redeploy is country-specific. Some countries only allow military women to deploy once to UN peace operations, even though this is not always the case for their male colleagues.

52 Several women said they made a conscious effort to treat their juniors with dignity and respect based on their person rather than their rank. This approach made them highly appreciated and wanted “soldiers’ leaders.”

success will be the future success for them,” as described by a military woman deployed to MINUSCA. Some women also found satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment in proving prejudices against women wrong, which they said made them resilient and improved their character. One woman said that “you learned to surround yourself with people that would lead you forward and not backwards.” Most also try to establish or join networks and to identify allies among senior mission leadership, other military women, civilian and police colleagues in the mission, and national colleagues to assist and support them in addressing challenges linked to taboos and stigmas.

Many women noted that they had received specific instructions on how to avoid sexual harassment and assault from their national defense structures before deploying to UN peace operations. Others received informal advice and warnings from male and female colleagues who had deployed previously. For example, they were told to avoid moving around on the base by themselves, especially after dark, and to visibly carry their weapons. To protect themselves and their professional relationships in-mission, many military women decide to isolate themselves and avoid social functions during their deployment. Most military women choose to keep to themselves when alcohol use is allowed in-mission, as drunkenness increases unwanted advances and inappropriate behavior. To avoid becoming a target of unwanted attention, single military women also said that they would wear a ring to pretend they were married. Other women would avoid engaging in physical training by themselves, dress conservatively, or consciously keep their distance from male colleagues.⁵³

To mitigate taboos, several military women also advocated for other women to continue to speak up about taboos and stigmas. As one woman deployed to MONUSCO said,

Do not perpetuate taboos and stigmas by

judging and belittling other women. Do not be afraid to speak out and in defense of others when something is happening that is wrong. Work to make people accountable for actions by no longer accepting what perhaps was once “just one of those things.” The standard you walk past is the standard you expect. Be clear about what is and is not ok.

Support Structures

In a number of countries, informal and formal support structures have been established both for and by military women. In addition to individual mitigation, the women interviewed for this study indicated that such structures have been helpful in areas such as training, networking, mentoring, family support, and efforts to address inappropriate behavior and sexual harassment. They also indicated that there are downsides to these support structures, as in some cases they are seen as giving

Around two-thirds of the women interviewed stressed the inadequacy of national support when facing challenges such as discriminatory behavior, sexual harassment or assault, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

military women preferential treatment, which can lead to isolation, exclusion, and bullying. For these and other reasons, some women avoid seeking support specifically targeted at military women.

Support for Mental Health and Other Challenges

Out of the 142 military women interviewed for this study, 95 stressed the inadequacy of national support when facing challenges such as discriminatory behavior, sexual harassment or assault, and post-traumatic stress disorder before, during, or after deployment. In some cases, military women informally sought support from mission colleagues during their deployment but quickly found that there were no national systems that could support them in the long run. Many countries, especially in the Global South, do not have any support structures for military women, leaving them to fend for themselves. Because of this lack of existing structures, together with taboos about seeking support, most military women refrain from looking for assistance.

⁵³ Despite the fact that “any form of discrimination, harassment, including sexual harassment, and abuse of authority is prohibited” within the UN, these experiences indicate that the burden of protection falls on military women themselves. UN Secretariat, *Secretary-General’s Bulletin: Prohibition of Discrimination, Harassment, and Abuse of Authority*, UN Doc. ST/SGB/2008/5.

This lack of support is particularly challenging when it comes to mental health issues. There are persistent barriers and negative perceptions attached to seeking mental health support.⁵⁴ While deployment can have an adverse psychological impact on any UN peacekeeper, being a woman adds another barrier to seeking support. Interviewees described not wanting to come across as weak and confirm stereotypes about women's vulnerability.

Efforts to Address Discriminatory and Sexualized Behavior

Support structures aimed at addressing discriminatory and sexualized behavior, including racism, sexual harassment, and assault, require more attention.⁵⁵ Many women interviewed for this study felt that this problem has not been adequately addressed, and military women around the globe argued that national defense structures need their own #MeToo movement. But given persistent taboos and stigmas, it is only recently that women have begun to share their accounts publicly. Recently, a #MeToo movement started in the US defense force, and hundreds of women are speaking up about the sexual harassment and assault they experience.⁵⁶ The UK has seen similar efforts to address everyday sexism, discrimination, harassment, and sexual assault in the military.⁵⁷ As highlighted by a UN official, these initiatives are long overdue but are mainly taking shape in Western countries: "It is still a silent initiative for a lot of countries, mainly developing countries."

In some countries, reviews of inappropriate behavior within the military have been undertaken, often following gross misconduct.⁵⁸ While these reports argue for reforming national systems and bringing about cultural change to address such behavior, progress has been slow. Inadequate or nonexistent reporting systems prevent many military women from raising complaints.

Moreover, because of bad experiences and a lack of follow-up, military women around the world have little trust in these reporting systems. Multiple women who came forward said their experiences had been brushed off, they had been discouraged from taking the issue forward, and in some cases they were even threatened. Perpetrators often go unpunished, and many women even saw them being promoted while their own careers stagnated.

In missions, military women often feel unheard when reporting inappropriate behavior and sexual harassment and are sometimes questioned about whether they are sure they want to make an official complaint. Several women said they experienced retaliation, isolation, and bullying in-mission for speaking up, in some cases leading to involuntary repatriation to their home country. These experiences indicate that structures to address inappropriate behavior and sexual harassment in both national defense structures and UN peace operations are still inadequate.⁵⁹

National Efforts to Promote Gender Equality

In places where national governments are trying to dismantle traditional gender stereotypes, the taboos and stigmas around women deploying seem to decrease. Military women from these countries expressed a greater sense of community support and encouragement regarding their decision to deploy, which they attributed, in part, to a cultural acceptance of women having an independent career. This was especially the case in countries with national policies promoting gender equality such as systems that allow and encourage men to take paternity leave. Military women felt that such policies decreased stigmatization within their communities and allowed them to share responsibilities at home, which made them feel more supported when deploying.

54 If such systems are available. Most women from the Global South reported that such support is nonexistent in their countries, and they did not know where to turn to for mental health support.

55 As recognized, for example, by the Canadian Armed Forces, whose Operation HONOUR was established to eliminate sexual misconduct in the military. See: Government of Canada, "Operation HONOUR," available at: <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/benefits-military/conflict-misconduct/operation-honour.html>.

56 Alex Horton, "'The Military's #MeToo': Vanessa Guillén's Slaying Has Many Servicewomen Revisiting Their Own Deep Scars," *Washington Post*, July 7, 2020.

57 Deborah Haines, "British Army Needs Its #MeToo Moment,' Says Former Senior Female Officer," *Sky News*, May 25, 2020.

58 See, for example: UK Ministry of Defence, "Report on Inappropriate Behaviours," July 2019; Australian Human Rights Commission, "Report on the Review into the Treatment of Women in the Australian Defence Force," 2012.

59 The UN Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy 2018–2028 notes several initiatives to improve the response to sexual harassment, yet military women currently deployed to UN peace operations rarely witness or benefit from these.

Better Targeting of National and UN Support

Better targeting of national support measures could improve the deployment experiences of military women. All military women participating in this study identified ways to improve support structures in their home country, regardless of their personal circumstances. For example, single women without dependents indicated that they faced the false assumption that they did not require support for their deployment as they did not have a partner or children to take into consideration. They often feel left out of systems that overlook single women who need support taking care of administrative issues and attending to their personal welfare, relationships, and family responsibilities without the support of a partner.

Women with partners or children also indicated that they did not receive adequate support to manage the pressure deployment put on their relationships and family life. Military women said they often had difficulty accessing childcare and other support for their spouse outside of their extended family. These support gaps impact women's decisions to deploy or redeploy.

Military women often have difficulty accessing childcare and other support. These support gaps impact women's decisions to deploy or redeploy.

Several women from countries in the Global South reported they had not been able to go on leave to their home country during twelve-month deployments, often because they could not find an affordable way to travel there. Despite having the right to go on home leave, these women felt forced to remain in the mission area due to financial constraints, leading to a lengthy period of family separation and a clash with traditional beliefs about family and motherhood. The financial implications of traveling home during deployment often result in a catch-22 for military women from the Global South. As a woman deployed to MINUSCA explained,

In my culture, I am expected to stay home and take care of my family. Now that I am deployed, I have broken the tradition, and the

community sees me as a selfish, bad mother. I am in the mission for one year and want to visit my family, but I am now expected to save all my money to pay back for my absence, and I cannot afford to spend my salary on an expensive air ticket. I don't know what I will come home to and if my husband will still be around.

Not being able to go on home leave for the entire duration of their deployment leads many women to face breakdowns in their relationships. According to these women, their male colleagues do not face the same issues, as men do not have to comply with the same traditional values and expectations of staying home with their families.

This indicates that military women may require support to go on home leave, ideally through official arrangements between the UN and national defense structures. To address some of these challenges, UN DPO aims to time contracts to align with school years, and women staff officers or military observers with children under the age of seven may deploy for six instead of twelve months.⁶⁰ While mothers deploying in these roles have welcomed these efforts, further support from national defense structures and the UN is required for military women deploying as contingent members.

Networks and Mentors

Having a mentor or being part of a women military network are significant sources of support for many military women. Both informal and formal networks and fora for military women have been established in several countries. These include Sisters in Arms in the US, the WINGs program in the Australian Air Force, the Sandhurst Sisterhood and Sapper Servicewomen Network in the UK, the Networks for Military Women in Norway and Sweden, and various networks for women veterans. Military women have also established several military women networks at the international level. These include social media groups and the Women

⁶⁰ UN DPO, "Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy 2018–2028."

Military Network in New York, which is open to all military women posted to UN headquarters and member-state missions to the UN.

Most of these national and international networks and fora have been established to support and champion women within defense forces. They offer a safe environment for discussion and provide general support, mental health services, and opportunities to meet other military women during social gatherings. Some networks also aim to help women advance their careers within national defense structures and to increase the number of women deploying to UN peace operations by raising awareness about deployment opportunities.

Out of the 142 military women who participated in this research, 101 found these networks to be useful and described them as a significant source of support. Others, however, stressed that they did not like being part of networks or fora that target military women. Some said they feel that men do not participate in the conversations in these groups and are therefore not part of the solution. Several women also noted that there was a stigma around women military networks, as their members are perceived as receiving additional support that is not available to men. As a result, some military women reportedly choose to downplay the role of these networks and fora in order to “fit in” with their male colleagues.

In addition to national and international military networks, many military women are part of mixed networks that include civilian women or leaders from different walks of life. Many women also create their own informal support networks within UN missions. As one military woman deployed to UNMISS described,

In-mission, women have to take care of each other. Missions are still dominated by men, so we have to watch out for each other. That’s what I did while being deployed in UNMISS, and [it’s what] got back from other female peacekeepers as well. This made me more confident during my deployment.

Many of these informal networks consist of

military, police, and civilian women serving with the mission and are a source of support during and after deployment. Such networking initiatives are often personality-driven, and their success depends on the mission dynamics. While the dynamic between mission components in some missions was described as positive and enabled friendships to grow, military women serving in other missions reported that other components disliked the military and excluded them from social gatherings.

Training Opportunities

Out of the 142 military women who participated in this study, 119 emphasized the need for additional access to enabling activities including peacekeeping training courses.⁶¹ To fulfill UN deployment targets, some TCCs deploy military women who have not received adequate peacekeeping training and who do not possess the required language or driving skills.

Whereas all peacekeepers must attend pre-deployment training, military women interviewed for this study said that, unlike their male colleagues, women often miss out on the opportunity to attend more specialized trainings or language courses for nonnative English and French speakers. For example, many women do not have access to staff training courses, which limits their ability to operate effectively as military staff officers in UN peace operations. While women in some countries did not face difficulties accessing courses, most women participating in this study stated that they were not considered or nominated for peacekeeping courses by their national defense structure, let alone encouraged to participate. This was especially the case for junior military officers and contingent members.

When women receive inadequate training, they are set up for failure, especially when deployed in specialized or highly gendered roles. This can exacerbate the taboos and stigmas women face in UN peace operations. As a military woman deployed to UNMISS explained,

One of our female colleagues at force headquarters was not qualified to be deployed

61 These range from courses to fulfill pre-deployment requirements such as the UN Staff Officers Course (UNSOC) and the UN Military Experts on Mission (UNMEM)/UN Military Observers (UNMO) Course to more specific courses on logistics, planning, protection, gender, and other topics.

in the role she was assigned. She did not have the knowledge or skills to successfully execute her tasks, she could barely speak English, and she did not know how to drive. It was very frustrating for me and other women because it confirmed the negative stereotype many of our male colleagues had about female peacekeepers.

To address these training gaps, several national peacekeeping training centers have adopted quotas to ensure 50-50 male/female participation in courses that contribute to fulfilling DPO's pre-deployment requirements. These include the UN Military Expert on Mission (UNMEM) course at the Finnish Defence Forces International Centre (FINCENT) and the UN Staff Officers Course (UNSOC) at the Swedish Armed Forces International Centre (SWEDINT). UN headquarters has encouraged other member states to follow these examples to ensure military women are trained according to the standards laid out in UN policies and guidelines.⁶²

In addition to these quotas, several all-female specialist courses are organized each year to better prepare women military officers from all over the world for deployment to UN peace operations. These include UN Women's Female Military Officers Course (FMOC) and the UN Signals Academy's women's outreach courses.⁶³ Such courses can help build women's confidence, as illustrated by a former FMOC participant deployed to MINUSCA:

I was originally deployed in a support role, but I asked my commander to involve me in CIMIC [civil-military cooperation] activities too. I want to be in contact with the local population, and as a woman, I can be of extra value to the CIMIC team. Because of the FMOC, I have a very good understanding

Both national governments and the UN need to hear, include, and act on the voices and recommendations of military women themselves.

about how the mission works. This is why I feel comfortable and confident and have the feeling that I can truly contribute to this mission. I think that if I hadn't attended the FMOC, that I wouldn't have asked for this new task.

As per the UN Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy, these all-female initiatives are supported by DPO's Office of Military Affairs (OMA). OMA facilitates women officers' participation in these courses and has sent notes verbales to member states requesting that they deploy women graduates within six months of completing a course.⁶⁴

Conclusion and Recommendations

"As we commemorate the 20th anniversary of Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, we must do more to achieve women's equal representation in all areas of peace and security," stated Secretary-General António Guterres during the commemoration of the 2020 International Day of UN Peacekeepers.⁶⁵ Given the experiences described in this paper, this certainly applies to creating equal and enabling environments for women military peacekeepers.

Thanks to the women who shared their personal experiences for this paper, it is clear that taboos and stigmas negatively impact military women deployed to UN peace operations and sometimes prevent them from deploying at all. There are no exceptions: all interviewees across ranks, roles, cultures, and nationalities reported having experienced multiple taboos and stigmas related to their deployment. Despite military women's proactive efforts to mitigate these taboos and stigmas, individual efforts and existing support structures

62 UN Secretary-General, "Remarks to the Security Council on Peacekeeping Training and Capacity Building," New York, May 7, 2019. See also various documents from the UN Departments of Peacekeeping Operations and Field Support: "Policy on Training for all United Nations Peacekeeping Personnel," 2010; "Guidelines on Roles and Training Standards for UN Military Staff Officers," 2009; "Guidelines on Roles and Training Standards for UN Military Experts on Mission," 2009; "Policy on Operational Readiness Assurance and Performance Improvement," 2015; and "Guidelines on Operational Readiness Preparation for Troop Contributing Countries in Peacekeeping Missions," 2016.

63 Bradley Orchard, "A Briefing on the UN Women Female Military Officers' Course," *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* 15, no. 1 (2020). On the UN Signals Academy, see: UN Department of Operational Support, "UN Signals Academy," available at <https://rsce.unmissions.org/un-signals-academy>.

64 UN DPO, "Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy 2018–2028."

65 UN, "Women in Peacekeeping: A Key To Peace," May 29, 2020, available at <https://www.un.org/en/observances/peacekeepers-day>.

cannot eradicate the persistent issues that underlie the gender imbalance in UN peace operations.

To increase the pool of available, qualified female soldiers and officers and to enable them to successfully deploy to UN peace operations, both TCCs and the UN need to target the root causes and impact of the taboos and stigmas military women face. This requires direct and sustained involvement and commitment by leaders in the UN and TCCs. It also requires hearing, including, and acting on the voices and recommendations of military women themselves. The following recommendations for national defense structures, UN DPO, and future researchers come from female peacekeepers themselves and reflect the voices of military women around the world.

Recommendations for National Defense Structures

To overcome deployment barriers caused by taboos and stigmas within national defense structures, the military women interviewed for this study recommended the following steps.

Improving Behavior and Accountability

Almost all of the military women interviewed for this study stressed the need to improve standards of behavior and accountability within national defense structures. This requires adopting or strengthening zero-tolerance policies and putting in place accessible, reliable, and confidential structures to report and address discriminatory and sexualized behavior, including racism, sexual harassment, and assault. It also requires the leadership of national defense structures to immediately and directly acknowledge the impact of discriminatory and sexualized behavior on individuals and defense organizations at large.

Where policies and reporting systems are in place, their implementation needs to be consistent, reliable, and efficient to address under-reporting. As military women are frequently discouraged or not taken seriously when attempting to address inappropriate behavior or to raise complaints, national defense structures need to offer credible and reliable investigation services that infiltrate the entire defense force and link to the disciplinary and military justice system. These services need to

guarantee anonymity and to fall outside of the direct chain of command.

Military women also recommended addressing sexualized and discriminatory behavior by proactively managing the performance of individuals seen to be biased or discriminatory toward women. Moreover, given that (excessive) alcohol and drug use often exacerbates such behavior, TCCs should revisit and consider strengthening their policies on this. Interviewees stressed the crucial role of good leadership in addressing these matters.

Educating Men and Women on Taboos and Stigmas

The vast majority of military women recommended that national defense structures enhance efforts to educate military women and men on how to break down misconceptions and identify and deal with deployment barriers related to taboos and stigmas. National defense forces need to imbed these efforts into existing education initiatives to ensure that adequate resources are allocated and that all personnel are exposed from recruitment onwards. In order to address overt and unconscious bias from multiple angles, interviewees stressed that these efforts need to engage both male and female colleagues and be led by both male and female instructors. It is crucial that these efforts involve leadership. In addition, interviewees recommended using gender-neutral language, ensuring pre-deployment trainings and training-of-trainers courses take into account the learning styles of both men and women, and reviewing criteria for unconscious bias and barriers.

To further strengthen these efforts, military women recommended that national defense structures include training on the inclusion of gender perspectives in operational planning. They should also appoint and train dedicated gender advisers or focal points—both male and female—to look at the defense force's internal structures and the substance of its work. Moreover, military leadership should use standardized messages to promote gender equality in strategic, operational, and tactical engagements within their organization, including a focus on diversity and inclusiveness as core defense values and operational imperatives.

Recruiting and Retaining More Women

As women are vastly underrepresented in national defense structures, interviewees recommended reinforcing efforts to recruit and retain women.⁶⁶ This requires proactively enhancing the variety and extent of career pathways offered to military women. Military women need to be engaged in a greater diversity of roles, services, and occupational areas and given equal rights to career progression. They also need to be able to reach leadership positions. Increasing the number of military women (and other minorities) in leadership positions at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels is necessary to overcome taboos and stigmas. It can also ensure the workplace is diverse and inclusive, which is not only essential to the full acceptance of women in defense structures but also makes these structures more operationally effective.

To recruit and retain more military women, interviewees stressed the importance of career-support mechanisms, family-friendly policies, and adequate equipment. Defense structures also need to ensure that women do not feel isolated in their assigned post or occupational area. Moreover, they need to consider unconscious obstructions to female employment. These might include selection criteria that unconsciously skew toward men, policies that assume people have a primary caretaker at home, or requirements that applicants attended a military staff college, which may not be open to women. Because men are perceived as having more leverage in many cultural contexts, several women also stressed the importance of identifying men within leadership structures who could serve as role models within their military organization by actively supporting the advancement of women's careers.

Giving Women Access to More Training Opportunities

Interviewees recommended enhancing the training available to military women, both through their

national defense structures (e.g., military staff colleges) and internationally (e.g., peacekeeping courses). This would increase the pool of qualified female soldiers and officers, broaden the career pathways available to military women, and assist these women in meeting the standards for deployment to UN peace operations.⁶⁷

Currently, the majority of military women deploying to UN peace operations are posted in administrative or support positions. Broader access to training and education would enable them to meet prerequisites for a wider variety of roles at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels, including as part of engagement platoons and other frontline positions that involve community engagement.⁶⁸ In addition, general military employment and related enabling activities should be opened to women to allow more women to serve as military commanders and leaders. TCCs should also establish databases of military women trained for deployment to UN peace operations to connect course participation with actual nominations to deploy.

Proactively Reaching Out to and Selecting Women for Deployment to Peace Operations

National defense structures need to more proactively reach out to women, including through military networks and fora, to increase their awareness of deployment opportunities and the participation of military women in UN peace operations. Such outreach initiatives should include positive messaging about the achievements of military women deployed to UN peace operations, share the experiences of women who have returned from their deployment, and provide information about requirements and selection procedures. This outreach could be supported by regional road shows, as proposed by the UN Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy, provided that these initiatives engage national defense leadership.⁶⁹

66 These could include women-only recruitment campaigns, such as the flight camp initiative by the Royal Australian Air Force. Courtney Wilson, "Royal Australian Air Force Holds Flight Camp in Bid to Boost Female Recruits," ABC News, September 25, 2013.

67 In addition to these, it is recommended that nonnative English and French speakers be enabled to attend language courses before they deploy.

68 UN DPO, "Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy 2018–2028"; Baldwin and Taylor, "Uniformed Women in Peace Operations."

69 UN DPO, "Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy 2018–2028."

In terms of selection, military women emphasized the need for more women to be involved in decisions about who to deploy to peace operations. Staff involved in making these decisions need to be trained on how to avoid overt and unconscious gender bias. In addition, several women recommended removing candidates’ names and sex from their applications and using force objective selection criteria based on experience and skills. This would not only avoid excluding women due to implicit or explicit gender bias but would also avoid selecting women by virtue of their sex. National authorities also need to put in place conditions of service that allow women to say yes to deployment, including support such as childcare and allowances to travel home for leave.

Providing Women the Support They Need

Military women recommended establishing or strengthening holistic, structured, and coordinated support services. These could include military networks and mechanisms for addressing discriminatory and sexualized behavior. These support services should take into account the taboos and stigmas that surround certain types of support. For example, in addition to addressing taboos around mental health support, defense structures could offer support that might be less stigmatized, such as access to social workers.

Military women also recommended enhancing support services that allow women to better maintain relationships with their families, friends, and communities, whether or not they are in a relationship or have children. Such initiatives could include pre-and post-deployment days for friends and families organized by their military organization, better information and periodic updates about deployments to assist with expectation management, and improved access to communication tools during deployment. Several women also emphasized the need to normalize an equal division of childcare and parental leave within

defense structures to break through traditional gender roles and decrease deployment barriers for military women. Better targeting of such support services could make these initiatives more effective and positively impact the retention and deployment of military women to UN peace operations.

Designing Equipment for Women

Military women recommended designing equipment that better suits their needs. It is costly for defense forces to develop uniforms and equipment designed to fit women’s bodies, especially as they benefit less from economies of scale due to the comparatively small number of military women. Yet given the safety and functionality challenges that ill-fitting military equipment creates for both men and women, defense forces should increase their efforts to design equipment that is adjustable to different body shapes and measurements.

Increasing the number of military women in UN peace operations is an imperative first step toward creating an inclusive environment.

Several such initiatives are ongoing as part of broader efforts to enhance the capabilities of military personnel in general. Examples include the development of a tiered body armor system by Diggerworks

and the Australian Defence Force and the joint initiative by the Nordic countries to develop a Nordic Combat Uniform System with the same functionality regardless of sex.⁷⁰ These initiatives have engaged military women in equipment development and sought their feedback on its functionality. Military women across the world recommend that these efforts become more widespread.

Recommendations for the UN Department of Peace Operations

The military women interviewed for this study recommended a range of measures to address taboos and stigmas within UN peace operations. Increasing the number of military women in UN peace operations is an imperative first step toward

⁷⁰ Australian Army, “Diggerworks,” available at <https://www.army.gov.au/our-work/strategic-partnerships/diggerworks> ; Swedish Armed Forces, “Försvarets Forum,” available at https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/siteassets/6-aktuellt/forsvarets-forum/2020/forum_2003_lowres.pdf .

creating an inclusive environment. Many of the challenges identified in this study are likely to decrease once military women account for more than 4 percent of the people deployed.⁷¹

Strengthening Narratives on the Importance of Female Peacekeepers

Military women identified a need for the UN to strengthen its narrative on the importance of female peacekeepers and to improve proactive and strategic communication. The UN currently emphasizes the importance of women in peacekeeping to improve operations' performance, gain better access to populations, better reflect the communities UN peace operations serve, and act as role models.⁷² In addition, DPO considers female peacekeepers essential to building trust and confidence with local communities, which can help prevent and reduce conflict and confrontation.⁷³

Nonetheless, military women serving at UN headquarters and member-state representatives stressed that strategic conversations about military women deploying to UN peace operations mainly revolve around numbers. DPO needs to strengthen narratives on the value of having women in all roles in the force, not just the value of "employing women in roles only women can do, such as female engagement."⁷⁴ During strategic-level engagements with member states, DPO should emphasize that women make peace operations more operationally effective and clarify that initiatives to deploy uniformed women are about ensuring their meaningful participation, not just their numbers. Delivering this narrative is especially important in TCCs where military women face bigger cultural barriers where it could help convince reluctant leaders within national defense structures to deploy more military women.⁷⁵

Ensuring All Peacekeepers Respect UN Values

Alongside education initiatives on taboos and stigmas within national defense structures, military women emphasized that DPO needs to take a stronger stance with TCCs to ensure that the personnel they deploy to UN peace operations respect the UN's inclusive values. DPO also needs to ensure that mission leaders consistently address taboos and stigmas that arise due to cultural differences. This requires selecting commanders with the right attitudes and rewarding TCCs with good education in place.

DPO-led in-mission workshops and seminars could also assist in addressing overt and unconscious biases and gender stereotypes. These could be provided by mobile training teams. Ultimately, however, these initiatives should be mainstreamed in existing UN pre-deployment and in-mission trainings. In-mission initiatives should involve leaders at the force, sector, and battalion headquarters, with the aim of trickling down to all uniformed personnel.

Developing Mission-Specific Gender Strategies and Plans

Mission-specific gender strategies and the consistent promotion thereof by senior leadership can support an inclusive, gender-sensitive, and enabling environment for male and female peacekeepers alike. Such strategies should encourage the meaningful participation of military women in leadership and frontline positions. These strategies could include reporting requirements on the inclusion of military women in frontline mission activities to monitor whether military women are being given substantive roles.⁷⁶

71 The author thanks Pablo Castillo Díaz for this point.

72 UN DPO, "Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy 2018–2028"; UN, "Uniformed Women in Peace Operations," December 31, 2019.

73 UN, "Women in Peacekeeping," available at <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/women-peacekeeping>.

74 Interview with a UN official.

75 As underlined by Osland, Nortvedt, and Røysamb, this narrative should "move beyond the current discourse of attempting to prove the added value of female peacekeepers, as this can place unnecessary expectations on those concerned." "Female Peacekeepers and Operational Effectiveness in UN Peace Operations," NUPI, June 2020.

76 For example, in its report to the Security Council in June 2020, UNIFIL provided a more nuanced understanding of the presence of women by stating "6 per cent of military personnel serving with UNIFIL are women. As a result, only 5 per cent of UNIFIL operational activities include women." UN Security Council, *United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2020/473, June 1, 2020.

In line with the Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy, DPO's Office of Military Affairs (OMA) should be actively involved in these initiatives to ensure strategies and action plans are implemented and staff are trained appropriately.⁷⁷ These strategies also need to be consistently supported and promoted by senior mission leadership.

Military women also underlined the need for all mission planning to include a gendered perspective. Analyzing the mission environment through a gender lens, for example by generating sex-disaggregated data on the communities missions are mandated to protect, would provide commanders with the operational imperative to include women in patrols and other community-facing activities. This type of systemic change in mission planning could provide the capability argument for the increased participation of women military peacekeepers, particularly in contingents.

Engaging More Firmly with TCCs

Military women recommended that DPO's OMA use financial incentives, affirmative action, and stricter conditions to encourage TCCs to deploy more military women, including in leadership roles.⁷⁸ They also encouraged DPO to engage more assertively with TCC leaders to encourage them to hold their personnel accountable for their performance, nominate more military women to participate in trainings, ensure selection procedures are transparent, and respect and enable home leave during deployments.

However, several women questioned the willingness of the UN to confront member states on these matters and expressed disappointment that some countries only seem to pay lip service to the UN on the deployment of military women. As one UN headquarters official stated,

According to the Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy, TCCs that do not meet the gender targets for UN peace operations will lose

posts.⁷⁹ Unfortunately, the climate in New York is such that member states exercise political pressure on the UN to keep their posts despite failing to meet the targets. Some of these countries are supposedly "leading the way" in gender equality at the home front, but this does not seem to apply when we look at [the] deployment of their military women.

DPO needs to be better equipped to hold TCCs to account and to involve its leadership in doing so.

DPO also needs to better understand region- and country-specific attitudes on accommodations and healthcare in UN peace operations. It needs to assess the accuracy of TCCs' claims that women in peace operations face unsuitable accommodations and inadequate healthcare or whether these claims are being used to discourage women from deploying. In making this assessment, DPO should engage with military women themselves and develop a clear overview of accommodation and healthcare standards in missions to use when engaging with TCCs.

Making Recruitment and Selection Processes More Gender-Sensitive

Several women recommended that DPO's OMA ensure its own recruitment processes are gender-sensitive by removing gender-biased language and unnecessary prerequisites from job descriptions. DPO should also ensure that TCCs deploy qualified women and give missions the flexibility to move them into roles that fit their qualifications to avoid setting up military women for failure.⁸⁰ In addition, DPO should also engage in talent management by requesting the redeployment of high-performing women who it can then draw from to progressively fill leadership vacancies, including at UN headquarters. Several women recommended that DPO connect with national networks of military women to identify women who are ready, willing, and able to deploy, enabling it to follow up with TCCs on deployment selection.

77 UN DPO, "Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy 2018–2028."

78 This recommendation is supported by other research. See, for example: Pablo Castillo Díaz, "Where Are the Women? The Missing Question in the UN's Response to Sexual Abuse in Peacekeeping Operations," *Security and Human Rights* 27, nos. 1–2 (2016); Osland, Nortvedt, Røysamb, "Unity in Goals, Diversity in Means."

79 The UN Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy 2018–2028 states, "If T/PCCs do not meet the gender targets and cannot demonstrate actions made to reach the military and police targets, the UN will where possible reallocate posts to T/PCCs willing and able to deploy more qualified female officers and who are meeting their individual targets."

80 Interview with military woman deployed to MINUSMA. Some missions already do this: they assess staff officers on arrival and reassign them to more appropriate posts. This practice is recommended in all missions to fit the right person with the right job.

Holding Personnel Accountable for Discriminatory and Sexualized Behavior

DPO needs to enforce zero-tolerance policies for discriminatory and sexualized behavior in UN peace operations, including racism, sexual harassment, and assault. Most interviewees argued that DPO should develop and implement more effective approaches, policies, and joint strategies with TCCs to ensure accountability for such behavior. They also requested UN headquarters and mission leadership to acknowledge discriminatory and sexualized behavior in UN peace operations as a persistent and urgent problem and to engage with TCCs to address it more effectively and consistently.

For example, missions could regularly conduct anonymous pulse surveys to assess the level of cultural toxicity and identify discriminatory or sexualized behavior in units or by commanders. These surveys should be shared with UN headquarters, mission leadership, and the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services. These issues should also be addressed during mission audits, and force and sector commanders should be provided with checklists for assessing and addressing misconduct in units under their command. Several women recommended that DPO require all contingents to deploy with a code of conduct team. In addition, more military women should be appointed to leadership positions, and DPO should work with TCCs to reach a critical mass of women in contingents.

To prevent discriminatory and sexualized behavior, military women stressed that the UN needs to be firmer with TCCs on standards of behavior and ensure that mission leaders respect and value inclusion and diversity. Stricter limitations or bans on the use of alcohol in UN peace operations could also prevent misconduct.⁸¹ Military women stressed that collocating military women and improving accommodations alone are not sufficient. The UN needs to address the root causes of discriminatory and sexualized behaviors to change the culture within peace operations.

To hold perpetrators of sexual harassment or assault accountable, DPO should provide clearer information and guidance about reporting mechanisms. These mechanisms should be easily accessible, ensure anonymity, and fall outside the chain of command. Points of contact or hotlines should be made available for questions and confidential reporting at UN headquarters and at the mission level. DPO must also do more to make sure mission leaders strongly, consistently, and transparently address inappropriate behavior and that effective accountability mechanisms are in place and functioning. Several women said that TCCs that fail to respond appropriately should be punished and that the UN should simultaneously work with TCCs to help them develop better ways of working.

Establishing In-Mission Support Systems

Military women recommended establishing in-mission support systems, including networks and mentorship programs. While there are many informal networks, making these more formal would enable more women to benefit from them and ensure their continuity. These networks may include women from the military, civilian, and police components and from all levels. Given the taboos and stigmas around receiving special support, overt promotion of these networks by mission leadership would decrease the burden for military women to participate in them.

In addition, military women recommended appointing mission focal points to provide support and advice to military women and facilitate their access to mission leadership, including to address discriminatory and sexualized behavior. DPO also needs to ensure that all peacekeepers have access to counseling services and psychological support in missions, a need put into stark relief by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸² To overcome gender biases, military women also recommended increasing publicity about their achievements during their deployments. The Military Gender Advocate of the Year Award is a much-appreciated initiative, but future initiatives could recognize work beyond the area of gender.

⁸¹ This observation is supported by findings of reports on misconduct in national defense structures.

⁸² According to military women deployed to various UN peace operations, counseling staff in missions are predominantly available for civilian staff and only address specific cases within the military component.

Recommendations for Future Research

Building on the findings of this paper, further research is recommended in the following areas.

Toxic Masculinity and Challenges Facing Male Peacekeepers

The taboos and stigmas facing military women are different from those faced by their male colleagues, which are often linked to toxic masculinity. According to military women, toxic masculinity is often exacerbated in military cultures, leading military men to maintain an appearance of being hard and aggressive while suppressing their emotions. Not doing so makes them seem weak or “feminine” and thus unfit to serve in a military environment. As a result, military men are often stereotyped as being authoritarian, not having emotional intelligence or empathy, and being unapproachable.

Men belonging to minorities in national defense structures and UN peace operations face an additional set of taboos and stigmas. These are often linked to sexual orientation, religious identity, physical strength, and race. Belonging to a minority in any of these areas often results in dirty looks, whispering, exclusion, and rumors.

The dynamics of traditional masculinity are

harmful for both men and women in national defense structures and UN peace operations. It is therefore recommended that future studies build on this paper by comparing the experiences of male and female peacekeepers and including the voices of men who belong to both majority and minority groups in defense structures.

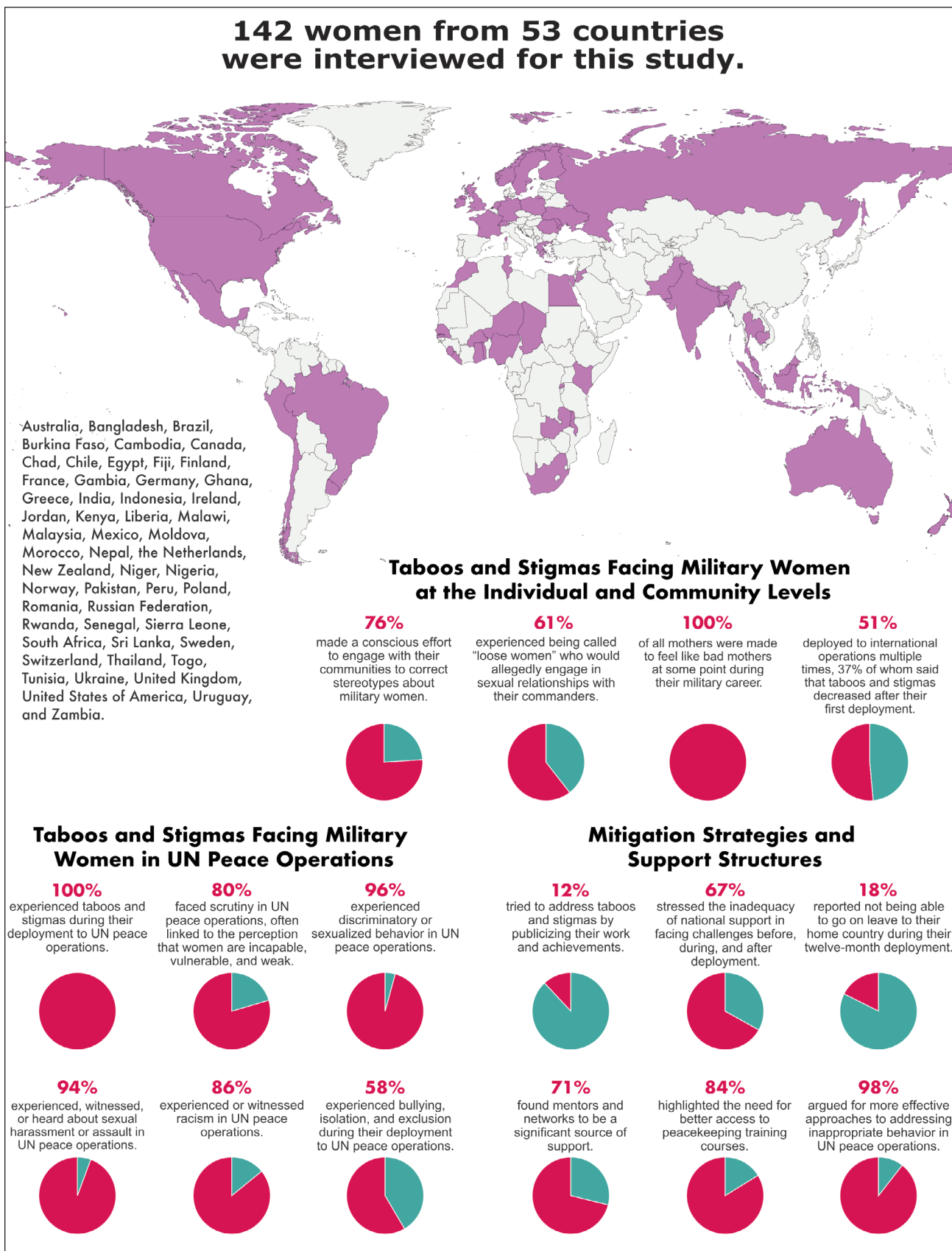
Intersectionality and Other Minority Issues

Interviews conducted for this study indicated that other minorities in national defense structures and UN peace operations are also confronted with taboos and stigmas that impact their deployment. Further research is particularly required on the impact of race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation.

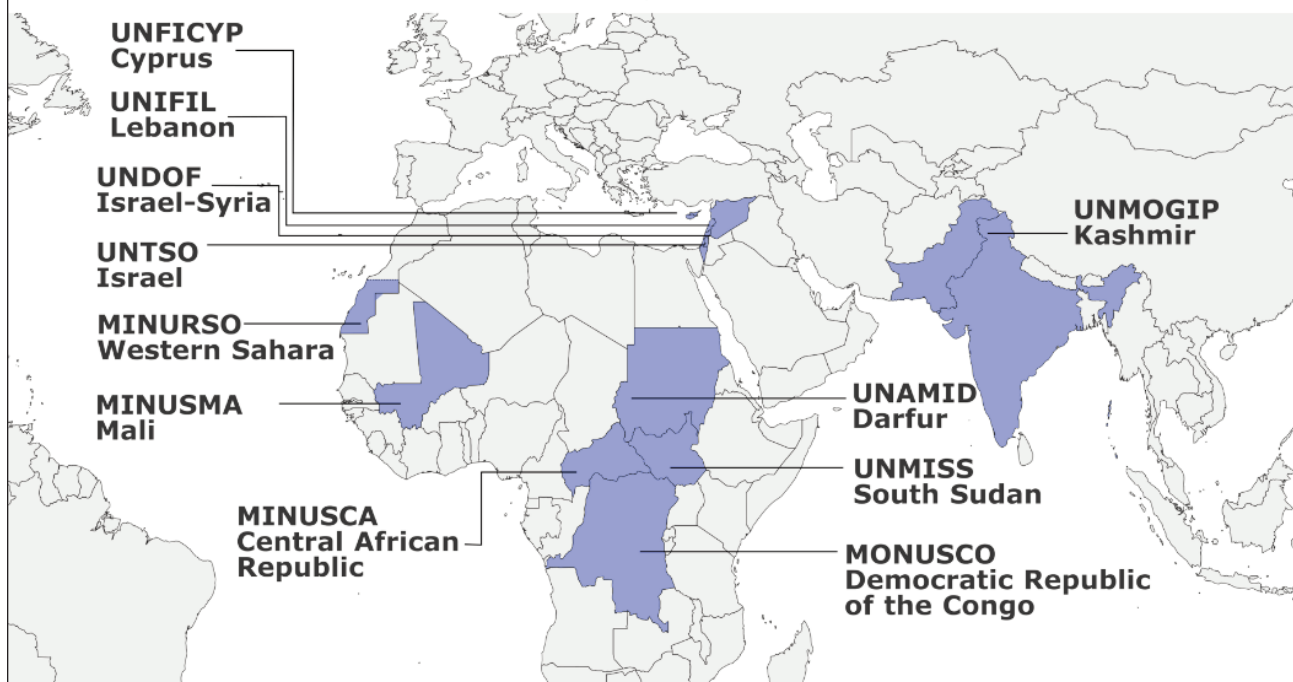
Female Police Peacekeepers

Future studies could look into the experiences of women police peacekeepers deploying to UN peace operations. Although the character and dynamics of military and police organizations are different, conversations with policewomen deployed to UN peace operations indicated that they also face taboos and stigmas. Better insight into these different barriers is required to improve future efforts by the UN and its member states to deploy more uniformed women.

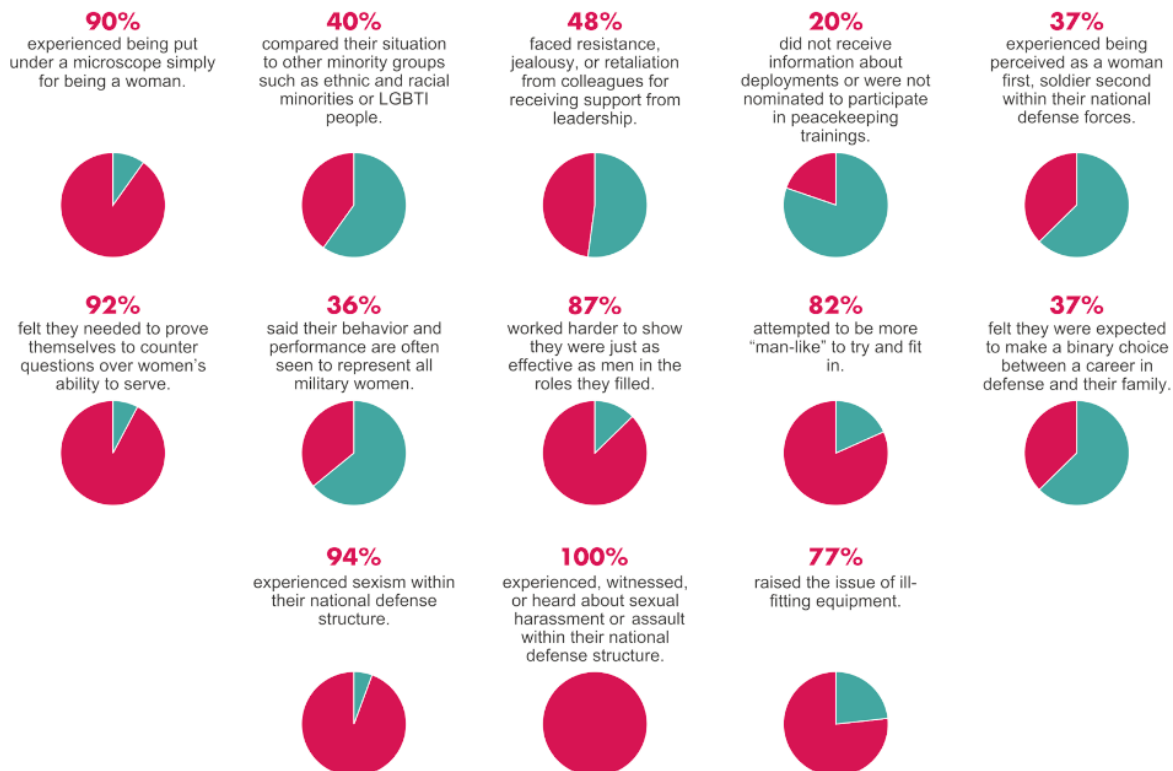
Annex: Interview Data and Findings

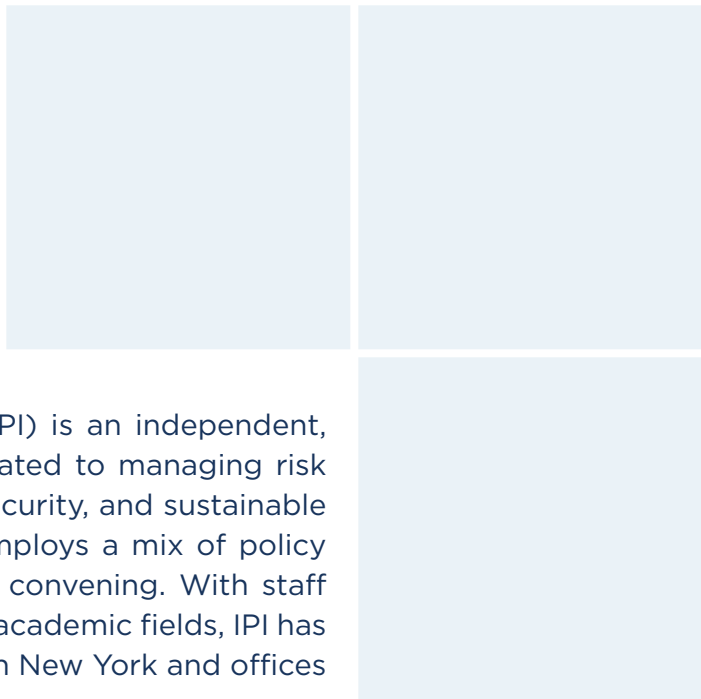


The interviewees are currently/have been deployed to the following 11 UN missions:



Taboos and Stigmas Facing Military Women within National Defense Structures





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