



## **Diversity in Peacekeeping makes the difference!**

**Major General Ingrid M. Gjerde\***

**Peacekeepers are different continents, nations, ethnicities, religions – and men and women. They all serve under the UN flag to help societies turn away from conflict towards a more peaceful and prosperous future for all. The variation is not only important for the success of UN – it is the very precondition and essence of what our global organization should be. This article will address the added value that women can bring to peacekeeping missions and some of the challenges women may face.**

Conflict and war affect not only men, but also women and children. An example is the current situation in Ukraine where million women and children have fled the country – and sexual abuse and rape is used as a part of the fighting to destroy the humanity and morale of the other side.

In 2000 the United Nations Security Council agreed on Resolution 1325, better known under the term “Women, Peace and Security”. The resolution reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction. UNSCR 1325 further stresses the importance of women’s equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security.

There are many reasons for addressing the share and involvement of women in conflict prevention and peace-operations.

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I believe in equality and the same opportunities for men and women as a means for the individual to reach its full potential. But the picture is even larger than this. On an organizational and societal level, there is a significant reward from selecting from the whole population, rather than just from half of it. Recruiting and retaining the most able and capable brains and bodies is only possible within a culture that encourages and facilitates universal access.

Diversity leads to progress over time, because we need new thoughts and perspectives to develop an organization and succeed in handling our tasks. I have personally experienced that it might be more difficult to work with people of different backgrounds. However, this is a low price to pay when compared with the dividend that comes with respecting, appreciating, and utilizing our diversities. Because diversity truly equals strength.

Studies demonstrate how UN operations with higher female representation produce better results. Wherever we operate, a substantial part of the population consists of women and children. I believe having this in mind is important to succeed. Studies have proved three areas where woman participation makes the operations more effective:

1. Enhanced intelligence and situational awareness

Women communicate better with other women in terms of the cultural context, and in terms of the experiences that women share. These are experiences based on gender- not because women are merely better communicators. Within some regions and cultures, women talking to women is the *only* acceptable way of reaching this part of the populace. This means having women in the forces will lead to a better and more comprehensive level of communication with locals. Experience shows how this, in its turn, may produce higher quality information about the overall situation where we operate.

I have seen this with women present in our forces in Afghanistan, the Balkans and Lebanon. Even in Cyprus I am confident the information we receive from local women on both sides is vital to understand the conflict, and decisive in the pursuit of a lasting solution to the conflict. There are active Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot women

supporting the peace process, giving a broader understanding of the perspectives of different demographics in society. I think we would make better progress with even more women taking part on all levels in the peace process.

## 2. Better protection of the force and population

We see less sexual exploitation and abuse when we have women in the forces. Further, when women are to a higher degree represented in the force, we can have more opportunities for situational engagement with the local population.

It is very sad that there are examples of UN soldiers exploiting local women where they are operating. This contrasts sharply to UN standards and is of course extremely destructive for our reputation and ability to solve our tasks. The UN is not oblivious to this and have launched a number of reforms to eradicate the problem of sexual exploitation and abuse. Increasing the number of women in the forces is one very efficient way of avoiding abuse from happening, along with raising awareness of the UN's zero tolerance policy and ensuring its application in both responding to sexual exploitation and abuse and awareness raising to prevent it.

In the nineties I served for UN in South Lebanon. At the time, we knew women were smuggling weapons and explosives. Due to religious and cultural customs we were not able to search women, because we hardly had women in the force to handle such things. With women to conduct the body searches, we can do our jobs without putting the local women in an uncomfortable and inappropriate situation. And, extremely important from an operational point of view, not ruining our relationships with the local populations.

## 3. Improved reputation of the UN

When the UN forces reflect the local populations, the populations also tend to trust the UN more, which is vital for our reputation. I think this is linked to how the culture changes with both men and women working together, instead of reinforcing masculine ideas about military operations.

## **The bottlenecks for women in peacekeeping**

At the same time as we recognize the importance of increasing the number of women in our forces, we experience that there are some challenges we must handle to recruit and keep the female peacekeepers at all levels.

Firstly, the share of women in the forces of our troop-contributing countries is limited. For the period leading to 2028, UN has set the goal for share of women to 7,5%. This share has proven difficult to achieve for many nations. However, the attention from UN probably encourages the nations to enhance their work on increasing the share of women in their forces. In UNFICYP we challenge every delegation from troop contributing countries to try to achieve this goal, and we have seen a positive effect of this effort.

When I look at the numbers of female peacekeepers in UNFICYP they look comparatively good, and we get a lot of credit for it. However, we need to take a critical view behind the numbers and on what positions the females cover. As an example, there are no females in my military leader group, nor as sector commanders or platoon commanders. Although not the case in UNFICYP, there are more than anecdotal evidence of some countries decorating their statistics by deploying females who are given neither meaningful nor equal tasks as their male colleagues. This shows that actions need to follow good intentions.

When the share of women is small, the women will have less impact on the internal culture in their unit. The cultures in the military and police organizations are mainly built by men for men, which means that they often are characterized by masculinity when it comes to language, behavior, activities, and preferences.

Many women may not feel that they are blending in, and they might feel isolated or excluded. There are many stereotypes when it comes to military, which means people have ideas about how military or other kinds of leaders should look and behave, like the classical and historical stereotype of a leader. Military leaders come in all shapes and

forms, just as in any other walk of life. We need role models who show that you can be an excellent leader without looking like a stereotype of a leader.

In many cultures, women are not encouraged to take leadership positions like most men are. Family, friends, and others might question women who leave their homes and families to contribute to peace in a mission abroad. We should all contribute to inspire and encourage young women to pursue their ambitions and dreams.

Several women experience sexual harassment or abuse, and for a minority it is often difficult to know how to handle unacceptable behavior. The UN has put this on the agenda, and it is addressed in pre-training, introduction courses and throughout the deployment for all peacekeepers. In UNFICYP we raise this topic on regular basis in training, seminars, and leader-meetings. And when there are cases of misconduct they are handled very seriously by the leaders.

Another bottleneck to be addressed is related to camp facilities, infrastructure, and equipment. There are examples where female personnel have been accommodated in distant places, with substandard ablution facilities. Such bad conditions challenge the motivation and may also affect the operation. The same is the case if the women are provided with personal equipment that do not fit, body armor, too long rifles, big boots, or rucksacks. We must make sure we have both equipment and facilities for both men and women. One of the objectives in relation to the UN's approach to accommodation is to have, when possible, accommodation identified specifically for women. These may differ from the approach for various contingents, but is in principle the standard approach for UN camp accommodation in line with its gender parity objectives.

There is no doubt it is demanding to combine family life with deployments to peacekeeping. This is hard for both men and women, but we can encourage troop contributing countries to set in place systems both to support the families at home and to be flexible when it comes to when to deploying those with the smallest children. Increasing the proportion of females in the armed forces of the world is actually very strongly linked to the social welfare programs of any country.

## **The International Day of Peacekeepers**

The International Day of Peacekeepers provides an opportunity to promote the tangible impact of peacekeeping as well as pay tribute to the dedication, professionalism, and courage of personnel who served in mission around the world. More than one million men and women have served as UN peacekeepers over the past 74 years. Today we will honor all those who have served, and in particular the ones who have lost their lives in the cause of peace under the UN flag.

The day should also be a reminder of the importance of diversity in our UN peacekeeping missions. We must build a common understanding of the added value that women can bring to peacekeeping missions, but also some of the challenges women face. To succeed in raising the number of women, we must address and handle these challenges at every level.

Finally, an important guiding star when working on peace operations, is this: there will come a day when the conflict and war – hopefully – comes to an end. A day when the UN operation may be disbanded and leave. When that day comes, society may finally start healing and rebuilding itself. I hope that the memories of a visibly diverse and capable UN Peacekeeping force will inspire the local population to emulate our recipe for success. That the small girls in a war-torn country may see that there is a role for them. Strength, wisdom, and compassion comes through the utilization of the entire populace.

And, ultimately, a lasting peace. Nothing comes for free. Let us all contribute to future Peacekeepers looking as you and me, and the girls and boys they are there to help protect. I would like to thank every single peacekeeper, regardless of background, ethnicity, religion, and gender, for your sacrifice, professionalism, commitment, and courage in your contribution to peace.

I wish you all a wonderful International Peacekeepers Day.