Social Capital

Women, Peace, and Security in the International Community

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Women increasingly contribute to peace and security efforts as members of armed forces, police, and government agencies. As they assume a wider range of military and decision-making roles, questions arise regarding the impact of women's participation on functional, social, and political change. Answers to these questions, which tend to rely on personal observations, political rhetoric, and limited available data, vary widely. However, consideration of gender differences can be important for the success of any operation.

For example, one military officer in a South American country explained how the addition of women to his boat crew enabled them to establish positive relations with people in a remote area along a river system where drug cartels control the farming, harvesting, refining, and transportation of cocaine. Indigenous people in the region tend to cooperate with the traffickers to obtain financial support and avoid the risks associated with opposition. These locals engage in activities such as cultivating and harvesting coca, which is then processed and transported via the river to neighboring countries for distribution to North America and Europe. Military teams patrol the river system periodically, observing the situation and striving to connect with the local population. However, suspicions toward outsiders, particularly government and military personnel, have impeded their efforts. Local residents generally avoid conversing with the military teams, but a recent mission that included female medical personnel to provide healthcare services along the river proved transformative. The women's presence aboard the boat and their interactions with local women and children fostered a warmer reception and more positive attitudes toward the team. In many villages along the river, locals welcomed the female healthcare personnel, thus facilitating meaningful interactions between the military contingents and the communities in the region. The military units working in the area took note of these gender effects and expressed their intent to continue building on the relationships with local women.[1]

As women participate in a broader variety of security operations, leaders would be prudent to strategize opportunities to take advantage of their presence and skills in order to add value to the teams and missions. By considering the distinct experiences, needs, and perspectives of both men and women, security operations can be more effective and inclusive. This helps to ensure that the operation is responsive to the needs of the local population and can thus increase trust and support.

Debate continues about whether women and men should be regarded as interchangeable personnel, or whether their distinct attributes and roles should be considered in security assignments and planning. Considerable evidence indicates that men and women differ in their tendency to trust outgroup members (for example, people from other cultures), and women tend to invest more in relationships than men.[2] As a result, women may be more trusting and, in some cases, more trusted than men. This distinction could impact a unit's ability to elicit cooperation with local people and affect the operation's success. Strategists must, at a minimum, integrate the social and cultural expectations associated with gender into their plans when teams operate in diverse cultural and ethnic contexts.

US Navy sailors help an elderly woman on the Amazon River, Brazil, 22 November 2017

History of Women, Peace, and Security Policies and Implementation

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR1325), passed in October 2000, recognizes the crucial role of women in peace processes and the maintenance of global peace and security. It calls for the inclusion and meaningful participation of women in decision making, peacebuilding, and conflict resolution, while also emphasizing the importance of gender equality and the protection of women and girls in conflict-affected areas.[3] Since the UN Security Council passed UNSCR1325, the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) policy framework has spread globally. Subsequent Security Council resolutions and national action plans have similarly emphasized the importance of a gendered approach to security processes and planning. In 2021, the Biden-Harris administration released the United States' first National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality, which outlines a set of goals related to gender equity and equality in domestic and foreign policy.[4] Following the trend in governments worldwide, the document recommends an intersectional analytical approach that considers the barriers faced by

individuals experiencing discrimination based on gender, race, and other factors.

Women can participate in every type of military job in many countries, including Canada, New Zealand, the United States, and several European countries. The United Nations promotes the participation of women in peace-keeping operations, and while the number of women in these operations lags UN targets, many have participated in UN missions around the world. Emphasis on women's participation in military operations and in peace processes is increasing, and the percentage of UN Security Council sanction resolutions that contained references to women or gender increased from 15.8 percent in 2010 to over 29 percent in 2015.[5] In 2021, references to women, peace, and security appeared in 63.16 percent of UN Security Council resolutions and 69 percent of Security Council decisions.[6]

Women's participation in previously closed jobs in the US Department of Defense is also increasing. On 3 December 2015, Defense Secretary Ash Carter issued a memorandum that required US military organizations to allow women into all types of jobs beginning in January 2016.[7] Prior to 2016, women in the US military were not officially allowed into combat roles, although they had worked in combat environments. Since those restrictions were lifted, women have moved into most military jobs, including special operations teams. As of March 2020, 42 women had graduated from the US Army's Ranger School; of these, five were subsequently assigned to the Ranger Regiment.[8] The US Army assigned a female Green Beret to a team in July 2020,[9] and the first woman to earn her Special Warfare Combatant-craft Crewman (SWCC) pin graduated with 16 male classmates in July 2021 and became eligible to serve in a Navy special forces boat team.[10]

Supporting WPS Values While Respecting Local Culture and Norms

Attitudes and expectations about women in security roles differ across countries and among ethnic or religious groups within countries. Some of these differences are deeply rooted in shared values, beliefs, and traditions. Insights gathered from interviews with both WPS practitioners and experts reveal a common theme: before we can begin to implement WPS policies in an effective manner,

Indigenous people in Maynas, Loreto, Peru, 1980

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we must understand the local norms and culture. Not only does interpersonal communication differ across societies, so too does the perception of women as members of society. Understanding how distinct social groups perceive women, what local women value, and other aspects of the cultural context is crucial for successful WPS implementation. If we understand and respect differences between nations and cultures, we can build a dialogue to influence a more progressive view of women.

Along these same lines, efforts to increase the uptake of WPS principles must be interactive, not prescriptive. UN goals are unlikely to be met, especially in areas where women's rights are not adequately protected, if international representatives try to impose policies or require specific methods for WPS implementation. Such an approach is likely to meet resistance in many nations; even if their governments strive to comply, official compliance does not equal grassroots agreement. What works in one country or culture may or may not be successful in another, and policymakers cannot force changes in culture and perception on other countries.

While many countries are making progress in implementing WPS principles, it's important to remember that progress is incremental, and it will look different from country to country. Along the way, we can acknowledge each country's accomplishments, and encourage con-

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tinuing efforts toward inclusion of women in security professions and the protection of women and girls in conflict situations. By understanding a country's politics and culture, what its people value, and what is important to them in their society, we can design messages that will resonate with them and build lasting connections. Similarly, the countries that already include women as leaders and decision makers can set a powerful example by improving their own WPS implementation efforts. When women participate actively in partner-nation meetings, performing their regular duties and receiving equal respect from their male colleagues, it serves as a model for other countries of what could be.

The importance of understanding local customs and culture is not easily overstated. Cultural understanding is indispensable for the successful implementation of WPS principles. It enables members of the international community to acknowledge and understand the diverse interests and experiences of women and men within their respective contexts. By establishing a solid cultural foundation for the WPS agenda, we can more easily identify barriers that limit women's agency. This, in turn, enables more effective and sustainable interventions to empower women as agents of change in security and peace processes.

WPS in the Future

Many countries have made strides in implementing the WPS agenda. While some nations may, at first glance, appear more advanced than others, it is important to evaluate national progress in light of cultural differences and initial starting points. The international community can and should respect local values and traditions without losing sight of the overall WPS agenda. Culturally sensitive communication, then, may open discussions and encourage decisions that increase women's equal participation in all societies.

Looking ahead, organizations are focusing on technology and future development in addition to addressing current gender-related issues. The 67th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women emphasized the importance of technology, education, and innovation in advancing gender equality. It expressed concern over the persistent gender gap in technology access, connectivity, digital literacy, and education in some regions of the world. The participants adopted a series of agreed conclusions that would "provide a blueprint for all stakeholders, including governments, the private sector, civil society and youth to promote the full and equal participation and leadership of women and girls in the design, transformation and integration of digital technologies and innovation processes that fulfill the human rights and needs of women and girls."[11]

As women increasingly participate in military and civilian security roles, questions about the potential benefits of women's involvement will persist. What does the international community gain from the participation of women in security operations and peacebuilding? What challenges must be overcome to increase the protection of women and girls during conflict? How can gender analysis help security forces to become more effective? This column will delve into these inquiries in future issues, exploring the implementation, challenges, and advantages of integrating a gender perspective in security forces, and analyzing the impacts of women's participation on social and political change.

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NOTES

1 This example was communicated to one of the authors during a WPS workshop in South America in the summer of 2021. Names and locations are not identified here in order to protect the program.

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5 Radhika Coomaraswamy, *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325* (New York: UN Women, 2015), 332: https://wps.unwomen.org/pdf/CH11.pdf

6 United Nations Security Council, *Women and Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary-General*, United Nations Security Council S/2022/740 (New York: United Nations, 5 October 2022) 28, paragraph 100 and footnote 61: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3990874

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