

'Women in Defence' Initiatives Need Greater Transparency and Parliamentary Oversight

Written by Georgina Holmes

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GEORGINA HOLMES, NOV 4 2024

On Friday 25 October, the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO) launched its report 'Towards Equal Opportunity for Women in Defence Sector' during the United Nations' 2024 Women, Peace and Security Week. Written by the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DECAF), with input on subsequent drafts from the DPO Office for the Rule of Law and Security Institutions and other experts working in the UN, the report presents a survey of successes and barriers to advancing women's meaningful participation at all levels in defence sectors globally, and offers recommendations for next steps in achieving greater parity and inclusion.

The report includes seven 'accelerators' of gender equality in defence, based on good practice, identified as follows (Department of Peace Operations 2024, p.8):

1. Assess barriers to women's participation.
2. Enhance recruitment strategies to attract more women.
3. Improve retention rates among women.
4. Build a culture of diversity and inclusion.
5. Combat sexual discrimination, harassment, and abuse.
6. Facilitate career development programmes for women.
7. Ensure equitable promotion for women service members.

Feminists and gender scholars have long had a difficult relationship with the idea of integrating women into the defence sector. Women, Peace and Security (WPS) is supposed to be about peace and many feel that women's collaboration with the military contradicts this. Women's inclusion does not align with the antimilitarist, decolonialist and peace activist positions that many scholars, activists and practitioners embrace. Yet women, like all marginalised groups, have a human right to engage in all areas of politics and society and should be able to influence decision-making in the most powerful of state institutions, including defence and security, and in global governance. All marginalised groups should have some input into shaping their transformation. At a more practical level, diversifying the workforce in defence and security and in global governance institutions is thought to prevent echo chambers that lead to narrow and often self-interested ways of thinking about peace, security and prosperity.

Yet, as many scholars observe, militarisation processes embedded in WPS programmes sustain a global 'muscular neoliberal security order', while also being dominated by white, racialised definitions of women/gender, security and peace. Mine and David Duriesmith's research shows that gender-sensitive Security Sector Reform (SSR) and demilitarisation, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes supporting post-conflict reconstruction are typically informed by a masculine logic that strengthens the power base of elite men within a given nation state, rather than instituting genuine equality and diversity in public sector decision-making on defence and security. Meanwhile, WPS narratives used to promote the participation of women not only frequently essentialise women and ignore LGBTQ+ experiences (as well as the experiences and needs of many marginalised groups of men) but frames women's value as being a gendered contribution, rather than one of gender equality.

This difficult relationship is further challenged by the current geopolitical climate, characterised by a revisioning and

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heightening of muscular Cold War politics; a decline in multilateralism; an uptick in militarisation (in 2023, global military spend was 2.44 trillion U.S. dollars, compared to 1.56 trillion USD a decade ago) and the continued prevalence of violent non-state actors, many engaged in proxy wars. Meanwhile, elite men and their predominantly male political leaders are choosing to use their defence sectors for lethal purposes, with the most obvious current examples being the civil war in Sudan; Russia's illegal and aggressive invasion of Ukraine, and Israel's genocide against Palestinians in Gaza as well as illegal interventions in Lebanon, Syrian and Iran.

During UN Women, Peace and Security Week events in New York last month, UN staff and diplomats ignored international politics and focused on depoliticised questions concerning the practical reasons for women's inclusion in defence. This signalled a will among UN staff to continue business as usual, but also a desire to evade the high emotions and political tensions debilitating Security Council business which are increasingly seeping into other committees and activities. Therefore, at the launch of the 'Women in defence' report, representatives of the UN Secretary General argued that women's engagement was vital for security and global peace.

For those supporting the normative reasons for advocating more women in defence, DPO's report provides a new benchmark from which to assess future progress. However, the report's findings by no means present an accurate picture of global trends: the report concedes that just 55 states (one third of UN member states with armed forces) responded to the survey, which had been sent out repeatedly by the UN Office of the Rule of Law and Security Institutions, while in-depth interviews on good practice were undertaken with just 18 member states. The report notes that representation from all regions was obtained, yet with limited data gathered, there was no opportunity to assess regional trends in relation to broader global trends. Some data is so small, it is difficult to know how representative of defence and security institutions it is. The report also states that women now constitute 10% representation in armed forces, yet this figure is deduced from a survey of just 21 countries (Department of Peace Operations, 2024, p.33). These figures could have been vastly different had more member states completed the survey.

In view of these limitations, recommendation 18 of the report calls on member states to 'share information and good practices on equal opportunity for women in defence sector with each other', via regional organisations, the Security Council Informal Expert Group on Women, Peace and Security, the WPS Focal Points Network and other routes (Department of Peace Operations, 2024, p.64).

Yet this recommendation will not be achieved without defence sectors becoming more transparent – a difficult task, given how sensitive militaries are to sharing their gender data. Ministries of Defence around the world may evade public scrutiny because they do not have data gathering mechanisms (as in the case of Central African Republic); because progress is slow, or because there is resistance in the upper echelons of leadership and thus no real appetite to make genuine, long-lasting, transformative change. In Rwanda, at the time I conducted research, the Rwanda Defence Force would only share data on addressing conflict-related sexual violence and did not disclose statistics on recruitment, retention and rank of women to the Gendering Monitoring Office – the government body set up to oversee meeting the 30% women target across all institutions, as per Rwanda's constitution.

Similarly in the UK, there is currently no formal parliamentary oversight on women and LGBTQ+ people's equality in the British Armed Forces. Only very recently has reporting to the House of Commons Defence Committee begun, following the damning findings of the Atherton Inquiry in 2021 and several high-profile employment tribunal cases concerning racism and sexual abuse reported by the British media. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that parliamentary oversight of women in defence initiatives, including budgetary oversight, increases acceleration of gender mainstreaming.

Regular reporting on gender data should also be made freely available. For example, the Indian Armed Forces, which now has two women Generals for the first time in its history – publishes annual data on India's Ministry of Defence website. According to Lieutenant General Sadhna Saxena Nair, speaking at the high-profile event in New York, this initiative is due in large part to the India's 'robust democracy', which led Parliament to ask the Ministry of Defence for real-time, open-source gender data so that progress could be tracked and monitored more effectively. However, parliamentary oversight of 'women in defence' initiatives should not stop at examining gender data. Security sector reform requires the continued engagement of civil society and should not be undertaken behind closed doors.

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Governments should rethink security more broadly to ensure that public concerns extend to concerns about human and ecological security, and that these are incorporated into strategies and planning.

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