

Women in UN Peacekeeping: Historical and Contemporary Patterns

Written by BD Mowell

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/07/10/women-in-u-n-peacekeeping-historical-and-contemporary-patterns/>

BD MOWELL, JUL 10 2018

The United Nations is the preeminent intergovernmental organization and arguably the most visible and most important function of the UN is the deployment of peacekeeping forces around the globe. Accordingly, patterns within this flagship program including the degree to which women are represented can serve both as an important reflection of the existing climate within the international community and to establish and reinforce international norms. Sidanius and Pratto (2001, p. 253-278), via their theories related to social dominance, suggested that predisposition exists within institutions to perpetuate traditional societal hierarchies including gender roles but that the roles assumed by women in society are socialized cultural scripts which are potentially subject to revision. In short, the prevalence of women as UN peacekeepers is a potentially useful means of examining the degree and nature of women's inclusion in the world's armed/security forces and a potentially important catalyst for creating new standards of inclusion of women in military/security roles. It must also be stressed that women peacekeepers contribute in critical ways to operations in which they are deployed, examples of which are explored in this study. For the aforementioned reasons, it is important to examine the representation of women in UN peacekeeping operations. This study provides a brief overview of women in UN peacekeeping roles and utilizes the most recent data released by the UN in seeking to identify spatial patterns regarding the utilization of both uniformed military and police deployments in major operational theaters. To the best of the author's knowledge, no previous research has sought to identify spatial patterns among women serving in UN peacekeeping operations.

Over one million men and women have served as UN peacekeepers in the 70-year history of the program, with over 3,500 losing their lives in the line of duty. As of March 2018 nearly 100,000 UN peacekeepers from 124 countries were deployed across 15 active operational theaters (UN, 2018a). Ideally, women should be incorporated into peacekeeping roles as doing so makes peacekeeping forces more reflective of the population they serve and potentially more representative of, and in some cases more effective in providing services to the civilian population in operational theaters (Clinton & Panetta, 2014). However, the integration of women as elements of UN peacekeeping forces has been a painstakingly slow process. In the 32-year period between 1957 — the first time that a woman officially served in a UN peacekeeping mission — and 1989, a mere 20 women served as uniformed peacekeepers (UN, 2018b). Beginning in the 1990s, peacekeeping missions began to shift away from exclusively combat-oriented roles (e.g. patrolling) and increasingly assumed a more humanitarian scope. It became more common that peacekeepers would directly interact with and assist in the provision of services for civilians within conflict zones. As women peacekeepers were perceived as potentially more complimentary to humanitarian roles — specifically to communication with the women and children among civilian populations — their numbers among the ranks of UN peacekeeping forces gradually increased.

By 1993, women comprised approximately 1% of uniformed UN peacekeepers. By 2014 just over 4 thousand women were in uniformed peacekeeping roles with the UN, 3% of military personnel and 10% of uniformed police personnel. The latter are modest numbers yet a substantial increase over nearly zero inclusion of women peacekeepers merely 15 years earlier. Just as the US and other military forces employ significant numbers of civilians to perform non-combat functions such as clerical and administrative duties, so do UN peacekeeping missions, and in civilian (non-uniformed) roles women are represented to an even greater degree. The most recent UN data indicates that women occupy 22% of the 16,507 civilian positions associated with peacekeeping missions.

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The continued underrepresentation of women as elements of peacekeeping missions is symptomatic of broader failures of UN projections in terms of attaining desired proportional representation of women throughout its operations. In terms of peacekeeping personnel the UN is dependent upon the personnel-related proclivities of member states, most of which have low representation of women among their military/security forces, but like the UN, most states have pledged to make progress regarding increased representation of women (Roberts, 2017). The underrepresentation of women also belies the many positive contributions they can make to peacekeeping missions.

A Council on Foreign Relations report outlines many of the substantive contributions women peacekeepers can make in conflict zones. Among the most significant potential contributions cited were (1) making peacekeeping forces more accessible/approachable to women and children, (2) facilitating interaction with women in cultures which prohibit cross-gender interaction, (3) serving as role models and symbols of empowerment for women/girls in war zones, (4) helping to address the needs of women who are former combatants or who experienced sexual violence or other traumas in the conflict zone, (5) assist in de-escalating conflict, and (6) provide a greater sense of security and normalcy to civilian populations, especially women and children (Bigio & Vogelstein, 2016).

Using the most recent (March 2018) online data related to UN peacekeeper deployments, this study sought to identify spatial patterns relative to both the raw numbers of women military and police deployed to various missions as well as what percentage they comprised of overall peacekeeping forces in various operations and world regions. The study focused upon missions with major peacekeeper deployments, which for the purposes of this research refers to missions with 100 or more peacekeepers. As of March 2018, a total of 14 peacekeeping missions included 100 or more uniformed military personnel, 5 of which also had 100 or more uniformed police personnel. A single UN mission, Haiti, had greater than 100 uniformed police personnel deployed but no accompanying military element. Of the 15 missions examined in this study, 9 (60%) were located in Africa, 4 (26.7%) in the Mideast (defined in this study as Southwest Asia and not inclusive of North Africa), and 1 (6.7%) each in Europe and the Americas. In addition to exploring geographical patterns this study sought to identify patterns related to the proportional representation of women among UN peacekeeping missions, e.g. if 60% of the UN's peacekeeping missions are in Africa, will 60% of women peacekeepers be deployed there or are women disproportionately over/under-represented relative to their presence in this and/or other operational theaters?

As reflected in Table 1, spatial analysis of uniformed military peacekeeping forces revealed interesting patterns, including African missions as the operational theaters in which women were generally best represented. While 64.3% of all UN peacekeeping missions involving military personnel deployments were located in Africa, 80.4% (2,545) of all women deployed as uniformed military peacekeepers on behalf of the UN were attached to an operational mission on the continent. The percentage of uniformed military personnel comprised of women varied from 2.7% in Mali to 9.7% (of the comparatively small total force of just 226 personnel) in Western Sahara — a slightly greater range than in the Mideast. Of all UN peacekeepers deployed in African missions as uniformed military personnel, 3.8% overall were women. The largest total numbers of women military peacekeepers deployed to Africa were in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (585) and South Sudan (474) with 4 other African peacekeeping theaters having between 321-381 women deployed as uniformed military personnel. Interestingly, 6 of the 7 UN missions with the largest total number of women military peacekeeper deployments and 3 of the 4 theaters with the highest percentages of women were in Africa. These statistics likely reflect that to a great degree the continents' conflict zones have ensnared large civilian populations including significant numbers of women and children, the demographics often used to justify utilization of women among peacekeeping missions.

Data provided in Table 1 illustrates that of the 14 active peacekeeping theaters involving uniformed military deployments, 4 or 28.6% were located in the Mideast. Of all women deployed as uniformed military personnel on behalf of UN peacekeeping missions, 18% were in Mideast theaters, with the largest percentages of women within the region associated with the relatively small UN missions located in Israel and Iraq, with 9.2% and 6.6% respectively. By far the largest total number of women deployed as military peacekeepers in the Mideast was in the Lebanon operation, with 500 or 87.9% of women military peacekeepers in a Mideast theater. It should be noted that many UN missions in both the Mideast (Iraq and Lebanon) as well as Africa (Libya, Mali, Somalia, (North) Sudan, and Western Sahara) are based in Muslim-majority areas and often had among the largest representations of women among peacekeepers deployed, reflecting the need for same-gender peacekeepers to communicate with and

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provide services for women in those societies due to cultural considerations (Princeton, 2014).

Table 1 – Representation of Women among UN Uniformed Military Peacekeeping Missions

	<u>Peacekeeping Mission</u>	<u>Women as Percentage of Peacekeepers</u>	<u>Total Number of Women in Mission</u>
<u>Africa</u>	Central African Republic	3.2%	339
	DR Congo	3.7%	585
	Libya	5.5%	13
	Mali	2.7%	321
	Somalia	7.0%	41
	Sudan (Darfur)	3.8%	369
	Sudan (disputed zone)	8.5%	381
	Sudan (South)	3.4%	474
	Western Sahara	9.7%	22
		<u>Total:</u>	<u>2545</u>
<u>Mideast</u>	Golan Heights	3.8%	39
	Iraq	6.6%	16
	Israel/Mideast	9.2%	14
	Lebanon	4.8%	500
		<u>Total:</u>	<u>569</u>
<u>Europe</u>	Cyprus	6.5%	52
<u>Total Women as Uniformed Military Peacekeepers:</u>			<u>3166</u>

Even in conflict zones, the first avenue of recourse in seeking help with abuse, exploitation or other forms of danger may be police units rather than the military. Also, the civilian population may be more accustomed to seeing and interacting with police in their daily lives — rather than soldiers — and accordingly may be less intimidated by and more inclined to approach police. Additionally, whereas military peacekeeping units may have a more narrow scope of mission (e.g. de-escalating conflict between warring parties or former combatants), police elements among peacekeeping forces may be deployed to address a range of civilian safety issues including former or ongoing human rights violations (UN, 2015). Such realities combined with UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which among other things calls for increased involvement of women in peace and security, would seem to necessitate women's participation in both military and police peacekeeping missions. This study examined patterns related to both roles.

As indicated in Table 2, women comprised the largest percentage of uniformed UN police in South Sudan with 20.8%, followed by missions in DR Congo and Darfur, Sudan with 12.5% and 10.6% respectively. Among UN police peacekeepers at all 5 African operations women comprised an average of 10.8% of deployments. The largest total number of women deployed as police were in South Sudan and Darfur, Sudan with 274 and 271 respectively. Interestingly and in contrast with military deployments, among the 5 operational theaters in Africa with UN police presence, only one country, Mali, had a Muslim majority and it hosted both the smallest percentage and total number of women deployed. Of 1,083 women serving in uniformed police missions for the UN, 1,004 or 92.7% were in

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African theaters with the small remaining balance serving in Haiti.

Table 2 – Representation of Women among UN Uniformed Police Peacekeeping Missions

	<u>Peacekeeping Mission</u>	<u>Women as Percentage of Peacekeepers</u>	<u>Total Number of Women in Mission</u>
<u>Africa</u>	Central African Republic	8.0%	164
	DR Congo	12.5%	125
	Sudan (Darfur)	10.6%	271
	Sudan (South)	20.8%	274
	<u>Total:</u>		<u>1004</u>
<u>Americas</u>	Haiti	1.3%	79
<u>Total Women as Uniformed Police Peacekeepers:</u>			<u>1083</u>

This research provided several conclusions. Firstly, data indicated that women among the ranks of military peacekeepers are not uncommon in Muslim-majority operational theaters, seemingly helping to dispel perceptions that patriarchal traditions common in many Islamic and other cultures would limit the effective contributions of women peacekeepers. Of the 15 UN missions included in the study, 8 are in Muslim-majority countries/areas and these 8 operational theaters often had among the largest representations of women peacekeepers. Secondly, as other research has indicated, uniformed women peace keepers comprise a substantially larger percentage of UN-sanctioned police personnel than they constitute as uniformed UN-sanctioned military personnel. Thirdly, in contrast with women in uniformed military peacekeeping roles, UN deployments of women police personnel at present is overwhelmingly in Christian-majority countries, with only 125 (12.5%) of the combined total of 1,004 uniformed women police personnel deployed to a Muslim-majority theater (Mali), a pattern deserving of additional study. As the inclusion of women among peacekeeping elements continues to expand, hopefully future research into the phenomenon will continue to emerge, perhaps including research addressing some of the questions raised in this preliminary study.

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About the author:

Dr. BD Mowell has authored nearly 100 articles or book chapters; authored or edited 5 books including 2 titles published by the National Council for Geographic Education. He has authored numerous chapters in edited books including “The Continuing Evolution of US Nuclear Weapons Policy” in *The Future of US Warfare* (Routledge 2017), and “Domestic and Transnational Dimensions of Narco-terrorism and Countermeasures in Mexico” in the *Palgrave Handbook of Counterterrorism Policy* (Palgrave 2017). Dr. Mowell has also authored articles for a range of academic journals including *The Journal of Geography*, *Social Education*, and *European Political Studies*.