

VOLUME 4 · ISSUE 01



BALSILLIE
PAPERS

Gender and Protection in UN Peacekeeping: Towards Inclusive Protection Practice

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April 12, 2021

Since the turn of the millennium, protecting civilians and empowering women have emerged as top priorities on the United Nations' peace and security agenda. Yet it remains an awkward truth that even as the protection of civilians (PoC) and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agendas have become part of the UN's institutional machinery, the organization still struggles to shed a reputation for being unable to protect women in conflict zones; not only from armed factions but from its own personnel.

Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, protecting civilians and empowering women have emerged as top priorities on the United Nations' peace and security agenda. Yet it remains an awkward truth that even as the protection of civilians (PoC) and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agendas have become part of the UN's institutional machinery, the organization still struggles to shed a reputation for being unable to protect women in conflict zones; not only from armed factions but from its own personnel. More than 2,000 complaints of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) were levelled against UN peacekeepers between 2005 and 2017, underpinning a widespread sentiment that peacekeeping "has a sexual abuse problem".¹ While the UN's persistent SEA troubles have eroded the credibility of peace operations among host-country communities, they have also overshadowed the other face of this problem: the chronically-limited capacity of peacekeepers to protect civilians against sexual and gender-based violence committed by conflict parties themselves.

In this paper we examine the intersection of the WPS and PoC agendas in the context of contemporary UN peace operations, taking as our starting point the tendency of peacekeeping discourse and practice to rely on essentialist understandings of women in conflict as either helpless victims or passive beneficiaries. As feminist scholars have long pointed out, such views are embedded within a culture of peacekeeping that remains governed by masculine norms and which in turn "militates against positioning women as empowered agents."² Such tendencies are especially pronounced with regard to the PoC agenda, where women are regularly categorized – alongside children – as 'the particularly vulnerable' in need of special protection measures. While such assumptions serve to deny women's agency (equating it to that of children), in the process undercutting the wider participation/empowerment priorities of the broader WPS agenda, they simultaneously overestimate the capacity of the UN in general, and of armed peacekeepers in particular, as protectors. As a consequence, despite the laudable rhetoric of both the PoC and WPS agendas, too many women in the contexts where peacekeepers operate remain *both* unprotected and disempowered. The primary means of addressing this suboptimal outcome has been the continuing push to boost the number of uniformed female peacekeepers, with Canada's 2017 Elsie Initiative for Women in Peace Operations serving as a prominent case in point. We suggest that this strategy will continue to yield disappointing results unless accompanied by a concerted effort to re-balance the military and the political dimensions of protection, focusing less on the projection of physical force and more on closer engagement with the very communities – and the women – that peacekeepers are mandated to protect.

¹ Larson, K. and P. Dodds (2017) 'UN peacekeepers in Congo hold record for rape, sex abuse'. Associated Press, 23 September. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/69e56ab46cab400f9f4b3753bd79c930>; Wheeler, S. (2020) 'UN Peacekeeping has a Sexual Abuse Problem'. Human Rights Watch, 11 January. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/01/11/un-peacekeeping-has-sexual-abuse-problem>

² Puechguirbal, N. (2010) 'Discourses on Gender, Patriarchy and Resolution 1325: A Textual Analysis of UN Documents'. *International Peacekeeping* 17(2): 172-187; Reilly, N. (2018) "How Ending Impunity for Conflict-Related Sexual Violence Overwhelmed the UN Women, Peace and Security Agenda: A Discursive Genealogy". *Violence Against Women* 24(6): 631-649.

Sexual Violence and ‘Women’s Concerns’

While the idea of ‘protector as predator’ in the context of peacekeeping still packs a conscience-shocking punch, SEA – understood as abuse of a position of vulnerability for sexual purposes, or any actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature³ – is as old as peacekeeping itself. A particularly graphic reminder of this history came in 2015, with the leaking of an internal UN report documenting extensive sexual exploitation by members of the MINUSCA mission in the Central African Republic (CAR). So troubling was the situation in CAR, in fact, that MINUSCA had to take the extraordinary step of patrolling outside its own bases to limit contact between off-duty peacekeepers and the civilian population.⁴ Speaking after having fired his special representative in CAR over the matter, then-UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon characterized SEA as “a cancer in our system that is doing grave harm to the lives of the people we are meant to protect and serve.”⁵

While SEA is but one aspect of the larger scourge of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), its devastating reputational impacts on peacekeeping have made it a central focus of UN reform efforts at the intersection of gender and PoC. Beginning with the Secretary-General’s 2003 zero-tolerance Bulletin, the UN – despite having little direct legal authority over uniformed personnel provided by member states – has instituted a wide range of measures to deter, detect and penalize SEA. Even though SEA is far from the exclusive preserve of uniformed peacekeepers, many of these measures aim to hold troop-contributing countries (TCC’s) accountable for the behaviour of their troops, including through the threat of wholesale contingent repatriation should TCC’s refuse to prosecute SEA perpetrators within their ranks. Despite this flurry of activity, the UN’s record on SEA remains decidedly mixed. Some observers suggest that, after several false starts, the UN may be beginning to turn the corner on SEA eradication, while others point to ongoing failures to act – the troubling and thus far consequence-free behaviour of members of the Burundian MINUSCA contingent being one case in point – as evidence of continuing institutional complacency.⁶ Ultimately, despite the considerable attention devoted to accountability and performance issues across the broader peacekeeping landscape in recent years, including the development and roll-out

³ Annan, K. (2003) ‘Secretary-General’s Bulletin: Special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse’. United Nations Secretariat, ST/SGB/2003/13, 9 October 2003. Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/451bb6764.html>

⁴ Benn, M. (2017) ‘UN Sex Abuse Scandal in Central African Republic Hits Rock Bottom’. *Foreign Policy*, blog post, 8 April. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/08/u-n-sex-abuse-scandal-in-central-african-republic-hits-rock-bottom/>

⁵ Moon, B.K. (2015) ‘Secretary-General’s remarks to Security Council consultations on the situation in the Central African Republic’. United Nations, 13 August. Available at: <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2015-08-13/secretary-generals-remarks-security-council-consultations-situation>

⁶ Luedke, A., C. Lewis, and M. Rodriguez (2017) ‘Sexual Violence, Exploitation, and Abuse: Improving Prevention Across Conflicts and Crises’. United States Institute of Peace (USIP) Special Report 415. Washington, 2017. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/sr415-sexual-violence-exploitation-and-abuse-improving-prevention-across-conflicts-and-crises.pdf>; Code Blue Campaign (2020) ‘The UN’s Deal with a Dictator’. February. Available at: [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/514a0127e4b04d7440e8045d/t/5e501ffc3a2ab25c3d4a6fda/1582309390358/UN%27s Deal With a Dictator.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/514a0127e4b04d7440e8045d/t/5e501ffc3a2ab25c3d4a6fda/1582309390358/UN%27s+Deal+With+a+Dictator.pdf)

of a mission-level Comprehensive Planning and Performance Assessment System (CPAS), overcoming the structural impediments to peacekeeper accountability remains very much a work in progress.⁷

It seems self-evident, however, that peacekeepers should be held to a higher standard than simply ‘doing no harm’, especially given the widespread nature of SGBV in conflict contexts and the explicit protection mandates now attached to most peace operations. At points during the long-running conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), for example, upwards of 1,000 women per day were being raped, sometimes in close proximity to UN bases.⁸ While countering SGBV has become a prominent protection priority – especially in the aftermath of the Security Council’s Resolution 1820 (2008) on the matter – not only does it remain among the most challenging forms of violence to address, but the UN remains ill-equipped to deal with it. The widespread variation in the scale and form of SGBV defies mono-causal explanations, and by extension, mono-causal solutions (especially those involving the application of blunt military force), while the stigma accompanying it means that SGBV in conflict contexts is still rarely reported, investigated, or prosecuted.⁹ While peacekeeping missions with robust PoC mandates and strong field presences *can* make a difference, key factors associated with SGBV – especially ill-disciplined armed groups – remain largely beyond the control of outsiders.¹⁰ At the same time, as Chiara Ruffa has noted, combatting SGBV simply does not feature prominently in contemporary military training or doctrine.¹¹ Ensuring that UN peace operations pay more than just lip-service to SGBV priorities, therefore, requires determined and committed leadership, especially in a context where the norms against SEA remain imperfectly internalized, as well as greater and more creative use of both policing and civilian peacekeeping resources. Funding and personnel constraints, finally, exacerbate policy-practice gaps; as Severine Autesserre has recently noted, the fact that MONUSCO’s gender office in North Kivu – where SGBV remains pervasive – was staffed for years by a single UN volunteer is indicative of a broader trend whereby UN resources are simply spread too thin to make a difference.¹² Fiscal belt-tightening in recent years – led by the United States, among others – suggests that this situation is unlikely to improve anytime soon.

Beyond the practical and ongoing challenges involved in sharpening the UN’s capacity to tackle sexual violence in the context of peace operations, the preoccupation with both SEA and SGBV as the core

⁷ On peacekeeping accountability for PoC, see Donais, T., and E. Tanguay (2021) ‘Protection of Civilians and Peacekeeping’s Accountability Paradox,’ *International Peacekeeping* (online version: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2021.1880900>)

⁸ Adetunji, J. (2011) ‘Forty-eight women raped every hour in Congo, study finds.’ *The Guardian*, 12 May. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/12/48-women-raped-hour-congo>

⁹ Wood, E.J. (2014) ‘Conflict-related sexual violence and the policy implications of recent research.’ *International Review of the Red Cross* 96(894): 457-478; Guterres, A (2019) ‘Secretary-General’s remarks at Event on Conflict-Related and Gender-Based Violence.’ United Nations Peacekeeping, 25 February. Available at: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/secretary-generals-remarks-event-conflict-related-and-gender-based-violence-delivered>

¹⁰ Johansson, K. and L. Hultman (2019) ‘UN Peacekeeping and Protection from Sexual Violence.’ *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63(7): 1656-1681.

¹¹ Ruffa, C. (2020) ‘Peacekeeping Military Contingents in Preventing CRSV by Local State Forces.’ *International Peacekeeping* 27(4): 543-549.

¹² Autesserre, S. (2019) ‘The Crisis of Peacekeeping: Why the UN Can’t End Wars.’ *Foreign Affairs* 98: 101-116.

overlap between the PoC and the WPS agendas over the past two decades has had two additional consequences for the way in which gender is treated in peacekeeping contexts. First, it has served, even if inadvertently, to reinforce broader tropes that define women in the context of conflict primarily in terms of their victimhood. As Helen Kinsella has argued, hidden beneath the superficially gender-neutral language of ‘civilians’ is considerable historical baggage – graphically reproduced in fairy tales of white knights and damsels in distress – that underpins a fundamentally gendered understanding of the distinction between combatant and civilian in the context of PoC.¹³ Nadine Puechguirbal, similarly, has challenged the so-called ‘women and children’ syndrome that persists across UN protection discourse, not to deny women’s suffering but rather “to try to understand why they are always depicted as harmless victims in need of protection by male protectors.”¹⁴ Others have, from a post-colonial feminist perspective, pushed the argument even further. Drawing inspiration from the work of Gayatri Spivak, for example, Nicola Pratt points to the ways in which contemporary protection narratives re-inscribe racial-sexual hierarchies that not only reinforce inherently conservative gender ideologies concerning protectors and protected, but also problematically portray the international community as the saviour of ‘brown women’ from the predations of ‘brown men’.¹⁵

A second unintended consequence of the ongoing preoccupation with SEA/SGBV has been to narrow the scope of ‘women’s issues’ in the context of the wider PoC agenda. In other words, not only are women typecast as perennial victims, but their victimhood is framed in the context of threats that are predominantly sexual in nature. As Reilly has noted, equating ‘women’s concerns’ with ‘sexual violence’ has worked against efforts to put gender and women at the centre of conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding, as called for in Security Council Resolution 1325, which remains the touchstone of the WPS agenda.¹⁶ At the same time, there is a paradox in singling out women as a particularly vulnerable category of civilian, requiring special protection measures. While such a move – common in Security Council resolutions – is meant to acknowledge and account for the unique threats faced by women in conflict zones, it also serves to construct women as ‘other’, outside of the mainstream (ie. male) experience and, as such, risks further marginalizing them.¹⁷

Paradoxically, PoC discourses – as they have evolved over the past two decades – have served to further constrain what for many feminist IR scholars was already an excessively-limited WPS agenda. To be sure, divergent views about the emancipatory potential of the liberal-feminist framing that has informed the WPS agenda from the outset have generated wide-ranging debate, even amidst a general consensus that the agenda’s overall empirical record remains disappointing. For some, SCR 1325 represented both a

¹³ Kinsella, H. (2005) ‘Securing the Civilian: Sex and Gender in the Laws of War,’ in *Power in Global Governance*, edited by M. Barnett and R. Duvall, 249-272. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁴ Puechguirbal, ‘Discourses on Gender’, 177.

¹⁵ Pratt, N. (2013), ‘Reconceptualizing Gender, Reinscribing Racial-Sexual Boundaries in International Security: The Case of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on “Women, Peace and Security”’. *International Studies Quarterly* 57, 775.

¹⁶ Reilly, ‘How Ending Impunity’, 2.

¹⁷ Heathcote, G. (2011) ‘Feminist Politics and the Use of Force: Theorising Feminist Action and Security Council Resolution 1325’. School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) e-print. Available at: https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/13161/1/SLR_GH_103-344-1-PB.pdf

ground-breaking set of commitments and an important feminist breach in the ‘bastion of masculinized power and privilege’ that is the Security Council. The nine related resolutions that followed have consolidated this initial breakthrough, creating a powerful normative presumption that women are entitled to equal participation and full involvement in all matters of peace and security.¹⁸ While not an end in itself, this gender-inclusivity norm thus provides an important foundation upon which a more transformationalist agenda can be constructed.

For others, however, the price of admission to the inner sanctum of global security governance has been the exclusion of several important strands of feminist thinking – post-colonial feminism among them – and the acceptance of a relatively narrow, relatively uncritical variant of what has been termed ‘governance feminism’.¹⁹ Dianne Otto, for example, contends that feminist engagement with the Security Council “has shifted attention from preventing war to attempting to ameliorate its adverse impacts on women.” Accepting a dubious logic around trying to ‘make war safe for women’, in this sense, has meant leaving unchallenged masculinist narratives that frame peace (and protection) largely in terms of militarized security.²⁰

SEA and SGBV, then, while themselves challenging the UN’s ability (and willingness) to protect civilians, both still fit within – and indeed reinforce – a broadly masculinist peacekeeping narrative that privileges a vision of armed, empowered men rescuing unarmed, defenceless, agentless women and children. Within this overarching narrative, it has proven difficult for discourses, let alone programs, of empowerment, rights, or equality to gain traction. Audrey Reeves, for example, has observed the tendency of gender advisors within peace operations to resort to gendered stereotypes around ‘vulnerability’ simply in order to be heard; in the words of one such advisor, “when we talk like feminists, we shut the door in front of us.”²¹

The UN’s primary strategy for both mainstreaming gender and tempering the rougher edges of militarized masculinity within peacekeeping operations in the aftermath of SCR 1325 focuses on increasing the number of women – especially uniformed women – at both strategic and operational levels. While greater gender parity in peace operations has, in principle, a range of salutary effects – fewer cases of SEA, better engagement with host communities, greater attention to the concerns of women and girls in conflict contexts – changing both the gender demographics and the prevailing culture of peacekeeping has been slow going. Women still represent less than 7% of all uniformed peacekeepers (both military and police) and, as recently as 2018, the head of UN Women called out the organization’s ‘systemic failure’ on

¹⁸ Basu, S., P. Kirby and L. Shepherd (2020) ‘Women, Peace and Security: A Critical Cartography’, in *New Directions in Women, Peace and Security*, edited by S. Basu, P. Kirby and L. Shepherd, 1-25. Bristol, Bristol University Press.

¹⁹ Pratt, ‘Reconceptualizing Gender’, 773.

²⁰ Otto, D. (2015) ‘Women, Peace and Security: A Critical Analysis of the Security Council’s Vision’. Melbourne Legal Studies Research Paper No. 705; Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2631325

²¹ Reeves, A. (2012) ‘Feminist Knowledge and Emerging Governmentality in UN Peacekeeping: Patterns of Co-optation and Empowerment’. *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 14(3): 348-369.

the gender-integration front.²² Far from transforming peacekeeping, women inside the system are just as likely to be marginalized by it. ‘Gender issues’, for example, all too often become the exclusive, specialized concern of (overwhelmingly female) gender experts while, more generally, as Reeves notes, peacekeeper roles “remain constrained in a certain range of behaviours deemed acceptable for each gender.”²³ Such views around gender-appropriate activity can translate into a different manifestation of peacekeeping paternalism, whereby female peacekeepers are restricted to barracks, or to low-risk assignments, by senior commanders concerned for their safety.²⁴ It was presumably such considerations – and the broader limitations of the ‘add women and stir’ approach to peacekeeping transformation – that recently inspired the head of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) to lament that “the solution is not to get women into peacekeeping operations, meaning we militarise women instead of demilitarising men, and leave them to their fates in a structure which is masculine to the core.”²⁵

In what follows, we briefly sketch out a vision of what ‘demilitarised PoC’ might actually look like, and how peace operations might more effectively and constructively engage with the very women they seek to protect.

Towards Inclusive Protection Practice

Existing PoC doctrine already incorporates both coercive and participatory dimensions of protection. While there will, of course, continue to be circumstances where nothing less than a determined show of force will save civilian lives, or prevent widespread SGBV, peacekeepers are far more commonly in situations where dialogue and engagement represent more effective instruments of protection, especially over longer time horizons, than armed confrontation with aggressors. Indeed, while use of force issues have dominated PoC debates in recent years, the contentious (and unresolved) nature of such debates has meant not only that recourse to force to protect civilians remains rare in peacekeeping contexts, but also that the comparatively greater political space that exists to expand non-coercive protection strategies – and to engage women in conflict contexts more directly in such strategies – remains underexploited.

Indeed, our contention is that re-thinking PoC from a gender perspective – and putting the protection of women on a firmer foundation – requires revisiting fundamental questions of how agency is exercised, and by whom, in conflict situations. In this sense, the PoC agenda may be ripe for its own ‘local turn’ – following a similar turn in the scholarship, and to a lesser extent the practice, of peacebuilding in recent

²² ‘United Nations Gender Equality Chief, Briefing Security Council, Points to “Systemic Failure” to Integrate Women in Peacekeeping, Mediation’. United Nations Press Release, 25 October 2018. Available at: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sc13554.doc.htm>

²³ Reeves, ‘Feminist Knowledge’, 354.

²⁴ Baldwin, G. and S. Taylor (2020) ‘Uniformed Women in Peace Operations: Challenging Assumptions and Transforming Approaches’, International Peace Institute Issue Brief, June. Available at: <https://www.ipinst.org/2020/06/uniformed-women-in-peace-operations>

²⁵ Madeleine Rees, cited in ‘Preparing for the 20th Anniversary of UNSCR 1325: Pledge of Commitments on Women, Peace and Security’, PeaceWomen (Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom) Statement, 23 April 2019. Available at: <https://www.peacewomen.org/node/103512>

years – involving a recognition of the hitherto-neglected role of local-level actors and their everyday interactions, with each other and with armed groups, in shaping patterns of violence. While this may appear somewhat counter-intuitive in a PoC context, where the focus has long been on the agency of the armed, it remains a rarely-spoken truth about protection, as Andrew Bonwick has noted, “that the main players in the protection of civilians in conflict are the civilians themselves.”²⁶ Given the unreliability of external rescue, then, the most effective civilian protection strategies may in fact involve enhancing indigenous resilience and preparing local communities to adapt and recover after crisis.²⁷

Community self-protection strategies, of course, long predate international peace operations (or PoC mandates), and communities and individuals caught in conflict have demonstrated considerable creativity – with necessity mothering invention – in their struggles to survive. Writing about northern Uganda, for example, Baines and Paddon catalogue a range of self-protection strategies, ranging from neutrality to avoidance to accommodation. Indeed, the more that vulnerable communities were herded into government-controlled ‘protected villages’ and subjected to imposed protection policies *uninformed* by community input, the less they were able to exercise self-protection. For Baines and Paddon, the marked contrast between bottom-up and top-down approaches to protection indicates that “civilian self-protection strategies should be the starting point for all attempts to design protection strategies on the ground.”²⁸ Finding parallels with the contemporary #MeToo movement, Anne-Kathrin Kreft has also emphasized the extent to which women in conflict-affected contexts *already* organize against conflict-related sexual violence, motivated not only by the collective threat that such violence poses to their security and rights, but also, somewhat paradoxically, by the space that conflict opens for women to engage in new forms of political activism.²⁹ Both examples point to what Daniel Levine has termed a ‘protection-with’ (as distinct from a ‘protection-from’) model of PoC, with the primary role of external peace operations being to help civilians “broaden and consolidate systems of protection that involve partnership with peacekeepers and encounters with the very groups that threaten civilians.”³⁰ Community engagement strategies – inclusive of both men and women, seeking to better understand community perceptions of, and responses to, insecurity as a basis for action, and clarifying what outsiders can and cannot offer by way of security provision – offer a logical starting point for such protection partnerships.

Such an approach – one broadly focused on the twin imperatives of local-level engagement and empowerment – is consistent not only with a wide range of recent UN policy guidance, but also with SCR 1325’s insistence on prioritizing women’s participation and leadership at all levels and in all aspects of conflict management and post-conflict reconstruction. Most explicitly, the 2015 High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO), as part of its call for ‘people-centred peacekeeping’,

²⁶ Bonwick, A. (2006) ‘Who Really Protects Civilians?’, *Development in Practice* 16(3/4): 270-277.

²⁷ Williams, P. (2013) ‘Protection, Resilience and Empowerment: United Nations Peacekeeping and Violence against Civilians in Contemporary War Zones’, *Politics* 33(4): 287-298.

²⁸ Baines, E. and E. Paddon (2012) “This is how we survived”: Civilian agency and humanitarian protection’, *Security Dialogue* 43(3): 231-247.

²⁹ Kreft, A.-K. (2019) ‘Responding to sexual violence: Women’s mobilization in war’, *Journal of Peace Research* 56(2): 220-233.

³⁰ Levine, D. (2013) ‘Some considerations for civilian-peacekeeper protection alliances’, *Ethics & Global Politics* 6(1): 1-23.

made the case that “engaging with host countries and local communities must increasingly be regarded as core to mission success,” while pushing for a greater emphasis on unarmed civilian protection strategies.³¹ The latest version of the UN Department of Peace Operation’s PoC Guidance Note also embraces this broader ethos, calling for protection strategies to be developed on the basis of inclusive community-level engagement, “with a view to understanding and taking into account [local] concerns, empowering local actors and organizations, and supporting existing mechanisms.”³² The former head of UN peacekeeping has gone so far as to suggest that the broader goal of peacekeepers should not in fact be to protect civilians, but to empower them.³³

To be fair, there has been some movement towards realizing these broad policy prescriptions. Most missions now possess community engagement strategies, while innovations such as community liaison assistants (CLAs) and community alert networks (CANs) have strengthened lines of communication across peacekeeper/community divides. Yet much remains to be done to fulfill the promise of inclusive and empowering protection partnerships, particularly as they relate to the engagement of women. Community engagement is not inherently gender-inclusive, and engagement strategies can too easily fall into the trap of failing to reach beyond local male elites, especially in patriarchal societies.³⁴ This is perhaps unsurprising, since it would be naive to expect patriarchal attitudes towards protection to evaporate in the shift from coercive to non-coercive approaches. This also represents an ongoing missed opportunity to tap into women’s experiences of, and expertise in, local security issues, in ways that are neither flattening nor homogenizing.³⁵ The consequence is that, despite rhetorical commitments to gender mainstreaming across the entire peacekeeping enterprise, bringing women into constructive dialogue about the security matters that affect them continues to be viewed as the ‘niche work’ of gender and women’s protection advisors, rather than as ‘the core business of the whole operation’.³⁶

Moreover, beyond the ongoing cultural shift required for women’s agency to be taken more seriously in protection contexts, serious structural impediments still need to be overcome in order to pave the way for peacekeeping (and protection) practices that are both gender-inclusive and people-centered. Across a range of mission contexts, the UN’s capacity to conduct rigorous analysis of local realities – and assess not only threats but also endogenous capacities for peace and resilience – remains inadequate.³⁷ This knowledge gap is exacerbated by short personnel rotations, especially on the uniformed side, and the

³¹ United Nations (2015) ‘Uniting our strengths for peace – Politics, partnership and people: Report of the Independent High-Level Panel on Peace Operations’, A/70/95-S/2015/446, 17 June. Available at: https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2015/446

³² UN Department of Peace Operations (2019) ‘Policy: The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping’, PK/G/2019.17, 1 November.

³³ Guehenno, J.-M., cited in Williams, ‘Protection, Resilience and Empowerment’, 295.

³⁴ Rigual, C. (2018) ‘Rethinking the ontology of peacebuilding. Gender, spaces and the limits of the local turn’, *Peacebuilding* 6(2): 144-169.

³⁵ Puechguirbal, ‘Discourses on Gender’, 178.

³⁶ Coomaraswamy, R. (2015) *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325*. New York: UN Women.

³⁷ Mahmoud, Y. (2019) ‘People-Centred Approaches to Peace: At Cross Roads Between Geopolitics, Norms, and Practice’, in *Peace Operations in a Changing Global Order*, edited by C. de Coning and M. Peter, 91-107. London/New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

reality that too many mission personnel still lack the skills, cultural awareness, and conflict sensitivity to effectively engage with communities.³⁸ Overcoming these limitations will require renewed investments not only in improved peacekeeper training but also in community-level resilience mapping, through which key actors and core relationships that are supportive of inclusive local-level peace can be identified, and through which the gendered dynamics of local-level insecurity can be better understood. And while convincing mission contingents to patrol on foot rather than in armored personnel carriers is often advanced as crucial to forging stronger links with local populations, the reality is that there are hard limits to the community engagement capacities of armed (and still overwhelmingly male) contingents, especially in contexts where the experiences of locals – and of local women in particular – with armed men tend to be overwhelmingly negative. Far more promising, and potentially far more durable, is the kind of community security-building facilitated by the NGO Saferworld in Kuajok, South Sudan, where local community members (including representatives of women’s groups, whose initial concerns around participation were accommodated through adjustments to the timing and duration of meetings) and local police convene on a monthly basis to work through ongoing community security issues.³⁹ Without assuming that such a model could work everywhere, at least not without adjusting for context (what works in Kuajok may not work in Bossangoa), the principles underpinning Saferworld’s broader approach – acknowledging the primacy of local actors in both identifying and addressing security issues, while being attentive to political and cultural dynamics that may exclude important constituencies – do offer a vision of people-centred protection to which UN peace operations might constructively aspire.

While 2020 marked the 20th anniversary of both SCR 1325 and the emergence of the WPS agenda, few would suggest that the current moment is especially propitious for a quantum leap in advancing either gender sensitivity or community engagement within UN peacekeeping. Budget cuts and the COVID-19 pandemic have multiplied the degree of difficulty involved in developing robust community-level protection partnerships. A growing global pushback on women’s rights and gender equality⁴⁰ – norms never fully internalized across the UN’s peace and security architecture – may further slow, and possibly reverse, the integration of gender concerns in peacekeeping contexts. Even in the absence of a more favourable global context, however, it is possible to identify specific areas where more inclusive protection practices might be nurtured, as part of a necessarily long-term effort to transform the culture of peacekeeping. Among these are:

- **Policing and PoC:** Much more so than their military counterparts, uniformed police are in the business of community engagement, yet the role of UN police (UNPOL) is often underemphasized

³⁸ Henigson, H. (2020) ‘Community Engagement in UN Peacekeeping Operations: A People-Centered Approach to Protecting Civilians’, International Peace Institute, November 2020: 18. Available at: <https://www.ipinst.org/2020/11/community-engagement-in-un-peacekeeping-operations-a-people-centered-approach-to-protecting-civilians>

³⁹ On the Kuajok pilot project, see ‘Relationship building in action: Kuajok, South Sudan’. Available at: <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/en-stories-of-change/relationship-building-in-action-kuajok-south-sudan>.

⁴⁰ Taylor, S., and G. Baldwin (2019) ‘The Global Pushback on Women’s Rights: The State of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda’, International Peace Institute Issue Brief, September. Available at: <https://www.ipinst.org/2019/09/global-pushback-on-womens-rights>

in protection debates.⁴¹ The challenging, often non-permissive conditions faced by many contemporary peace operations have also led to a marked increase in the percentage of UNPOL deployed as part of paramilitary-style formed police units (FPU's), which are more suited to crowd control than to community partnership-building. This trend needs careful reconsideration, as it has left too few non-FPU UNPOL on the ground to effectively operationalize the UN's wider community-oriented policing strategy, which should be central to the kinds of inclusive PoC partnerships described above.

- **Accountability Enhancements:** As noted above, performance and accountability have emerged in recent years as key peacekeeping reform priorities, and mission-level versions of the UN's new CPAS System are currently being rolled out. The broader goal of CPAS is to enable missions to more systematically track progress on key mandate priorities, based on rigorous data analysis.⁴² CPAS should in principle, then, enable missions to better assess the gap between policy and practice with regard to inclusive and gender-sensitive community engagement, and incentivize better performance on the part of mission personnel in this area.
- **Best practices for non-coercive protection:** Even if UN peace operations have comparatively greater room to maneuver on the non-coercive than the coercive side of PoC, at a more micro level the evidentiary base demonstrating the efficacy of inclusive, community-oriented, and unarmed protection strategies remains relatively underdeveloped. The connections between engagement and empowerment are complex and often underspecified, while from the perspective of overstretched missions there are obvious trade-offs between prioritizing engagement with those who already have the power to influence violence (ie. armed actors) and prioritizing the empowerment of those most affected by that violence. Given the stakes, then, more needs to be done to demonstrate – through close empirical examination, for example, of the experiences of NGO's such as Saferworld or Nonviolent Peaceforce – that community partnership-building can actually deliver the goods in terms of enhancing protection and reducing direct threats to civilian populations.

Conclusion

Protection and peacebuilding should not be seen as discrete elements of the intervention continuum, but rather, as part and parcel of the same process. The ongoing preoccupation with the projection of force as a primary means of protecting civilians has not only reinforced gendered stereotypes around who protects and who needs protection, but it has also obscured the broader insight that peacebuilding, both at local and national levels, ultimately provides the most sustainable path to reducing threats to civilian populations. A protection through (local-level) peacebuilding models, with PoC partnerships evolving into localized infrastructures for peace, provides a much broader range of opportunities for reconciling empowerment/participation and protection discourses, two decades after the WPS and PoC agendas appeared almost simultaneously on the UN's peace and security agenda.

⁴¹ Hunt, T. (2019) 'To Serve and Protect: The Role of UN Police in Protecting Civilians', IPI Global Observatory, 20 September. Available at: <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2019/09/to-serve-and-protect-the-role-of-un-police-protecting-civilians/>

⁴² Details on the CPAS are available at: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/cpas>



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