



## CHALLENGES AND PROGRESS OF WOMEN'S RECRUITMENT INTO THE SECURITY SECTOR

*The challenges and progress of women's recruitment into the security sector.*

*by Catherine White*

The progress that is being made towards gender equality in the field of peace and security is promising. The United Nations Women, Peace and Security Agenda highlights the importance of integrating gender considerations – namely the particular needs, roles, constraints and vulnerabilities of men, women, boys and girls – into security sector governance (SSG), security institutions, and peacekeeping operations. UNSCR 1325 (2000)

recognizes the importance of women's participation in peacekeeping operations, while resolution 2242 (2015) calls for the doubling of uniformed women personnel by 2020. Actions taken to actively implement the WPS agenda and UNSCR resolutions have been considerable, and great strides have been made in recent years. However, there remains a disconnect between calls to action and the actual implementation of change.

As of 2019, only 5% of UN military personnel and 15% of police were women. Building upon the Secretary-general's System-Wide Strategy on Gender Parity, the UN's Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy (launched in January 2019) set a

target to have 15% of women in military contingents and 20% in formed police units by 2028. At the current rate of progress, this is a steep goal, and the road yet to be travelled to achieve it is long – and winding. The effort to overcome the obstacles to the achievement of gender equality and to achieve the call to increase women's participation into peacekeeping operations and national forces should no longer even be optional. It is essential. This was highlighted by the resolution adopted by the General Assembly: 2021, International Year of Peace and Trust. This resolution called for: "recognizing also that peace not only is the absence of conflict, but also requires a positive, dynamic par-



participatory process where dialogue is encouraged and conflicts are solved in a spirit of mutual understanding and cooperation.” This can only be possible if the participatory process is extended to all. There is no peace and can never be peace without equality.

Despite the urgency of the aforementioned resolution, women face a number of barriers to their meaningful participation in peace and security efforts, at three different levels: (1) recruitment, participation and leadership in national security forces, (2) deployment to peace operations, (3) retention and promotion upon return from deployment.

There is nowhere more apt to start with looking closer at this than the recruitment process itself. There are several institutional obstacles which

act as barriers to the successful recruitment of women into the security sector. Still, the recruitment process is shrouded in mystery, often seen as actively hostile to women and is littered with roadblocks. In the past few years, both the United Nations and member states have emphasized the importance of lowering these existing barriers to women’s recruitment with national and international security forces. Several initiatives have been established to support the creation of enabling environments for women to participate in the security sector. But the lack of available and clear information regarding national and international recruitment processes still persist and is a serious impediment to women’s participation.

These obstacles range from the socio-cultural to the deeply institutional. A workshop held by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) into Gender Equality in Security Forces and Peace Operations identified some pressing issues. On a socio-cultural level, women wanting to join the security sector often face discrimination, prejudice and stereotypes. In many cultures around the world – Western ones included – local gender norms can discourage women from joining the security forces. This stems from a gene-

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ral perception of the security sector being a “man’s sector”. As a consequence of this, women willing to join the security sector might face a lack of acceptance or even strong opposition coming from their family and friends as a response to their career choice. They may also face family pressures (including coercion, e.g. withdrawal of financial support, risk of being married against one’s choice). The potential of these repercussions combined with the absence of recognition for careers in the security sector can strongly discourage women and girls from pursuing this path.

This is only exacerbated when, at an institutional level, there is an overall absence of consideration

and awareness of women’s specific needs, which can easily discourage young recruits. For example, due to unequal access to training facilities and familiarization with the required skills, there is often a lack of preparation and training for women prior to the tests which form an integral part of recruitment. The selection criteria is in many instances, outdated and in fact frequently not reflective of the tasks that the person will perform but is instead designed on a male perception of strength. Additionally, at an institutional level, the recruitment process is often seen as shrouded

with secrecy in a number of ways. These range from right at the conception of the recruitment process where there is seen to be an absence of information with regards

to the necessary requirements for the recruitment processes right throughout the cycle of hiring new recruits. There is a low level of retention of newly recruited candidates due to several factors such as discouragement, uncertainty about the future and lack of information on their career choices.

Perhaps more concerningly, the same UNITAR workshop found that there is widespread perception within institutions that women’s participation is a target imposed from above by the international community, and there is a reluctance to implement equity measures that can be seen as favours. This is a harmful understanding on a number of levels. While increa-







ing the gender balance of security forces and peacekeeping operations does not ensure that these fields be more gender-responsive, it enhances the likelihood that diverse voices and perspectives will be represented, and hence that different needs will be addressed

evidence for a more transformational understanding of women's participation: that increased female participation constitutes an operational asset in broader terms too. For example, according to General D J Hurley, AC, DSC Chief of the Defence Force: "To

stantly shown themselves to be assets in high-risk operations. It is these narratives that need to be better promoted, refuting the notion that women's participation is a favour or a 'target'. It is an asset, and must be treated as such.

**"ON A SOCIO-CULTURAL LEVEL, WOMEN WANTING TO JOIN THE SECURITY SECTOR OFTEN FACE DISCRIMINATION, PREJUDICE AND STEREOTYPES."**

more aptly and effectively. It is well understood by now that the presence of women increases local community acceptance of security forces, as locals tend to perceive them as less threatening, more willing to listen, and better able to defuse potentially violent situations. However, there is also growing

have its greatest effect, engaging women should be considered a primary element of our operations rather than an adjunct duty. This reflects the important role women in peace and security operations play in increasing our operational effectiveness." Moving far beyond stereotypes, women have consi-

Clearly, whilst progress towards gender equality has been made, there is much that still must be done and many solutions to these barriers which must be explored. The UNITAR workshop and subsequent report found that it is essential to address recruitment solutions with a top down and bottom-up approach and to involve and mobilize leaders. In order to remove social barriers and address stereotypes that limit women's access to the security sector, it is necessary to aim for a parti-







Assembly, peace is far more than simply the absence of conflict. Peace – true and long-lasting peace – “requires a positive, dynamic participatory process.” This can only be possible if the participatory process is extended to all, from the very conception of recruitment into peacekeeping operations. There is no peace and can never be peace without equality. And this peace-by-way-of-participation starts with the very first step.

participatory partnership with grassroots and community leaders, to talk with formal and informal figures at the grassroots level and engage them with informal opportunities.

Additionally, to really get to the root of the socio-cultural barriers to women’s recruitment, there is a need for more visibility and media coverage concerning the recruitment process. It is important to work on image and perception. Campaigns should be designed at the local and national level and be disseminated through different channels such as local and national newspapers, radios and television. These campaigns should inform and educate the public on the work in the national and international security forces with a particular emphasis on the importance of women’s role and the benefits of having men and women working together. Additionally, open doors, roundtables, discussion and awareness campaigns in

schools and universities could help sensitize young people on the role of police, gendarme and military forces. Communities and women could be invited twice a year to visit police stations or HQs and discuss with the security personnel.

In this systematic way, a targeted campaign focused on awareness raising and recruitment campaigns that specifically target women will be most effective in truly creating attitudinal changes. These must be based on the country’s needs, reality and the context on the ground. Specifically focused national recruitment campaigns will also highlight peace operations and other career tracks, to show the diversity of the job and eventually bring about relevant national advancement policies in addition to clear recruitment guidelines and campaigns. This is how long lasted change will truly be achieved. To revert back to the aforementioned resolution adopted by the General

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