

The Role of Female Peacekeepers in United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei: Opportunities and Constraints in a Volatile Operational Environment

Jumanne Sauji

Tanzania Ministry of Defence

Abstract

The participation of female peacekeepers in the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) has become an essential component of contemporary peace operations. This article examines the multifaceted roles of female peacekeepers in UNISFA, highlighting the opportunities they create in improving mission effectiveness, promoting gender-sensitive approaches to peacebuilding, and fostering community trust. It also explores the constraints they face due to the volatile security context of Abyei, organizational and cultural barriers, and limited representation. Drawing on a combination of primary and secondary sources, including UN reports, academic literature, and field data, the article provides an analytical framework to understand the transformative potential and persistent challenges associated with female peacekeepers in complex missions such as UNISFA.

Keywords: Female peacekeepers, UNISFA, Abyei, Gender, Peacekeeping, Conflict resolution

Introduction

The deployment of female peacekeepers in volatile environments has emerged as a key element in strengthening the effectiveness of United Nations (UN) peace operations. Within the context of the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA), the role of female peacekeepers presents a unique dynamic in addressing the complex security, social, and cultural challenges of the Abyei region. This paper explores the contributions, opportunities, and constraints experienced by female peacekeepers in UNISFA. It also assesses how their participation aligns with global commitments such as the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, focusing on gender inclusion in peacekeeping.

Background of UNISFA and the Abyei Region

The United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) was established by UN Security Council Resolution 1990 in June 2011 in response to escalating violence and political uncertainty in the contested region of Abyei between Sudan and South Sudan. The region is rich in resources, particularly oil, and strategically significant due to its geographic location. Tensions between the Ngok Dinka and Misseriya communities continue to pose threats to peace and stability, with the UN mandated to monitor demilitarization, facilitate humanitarian access, and promote dialogue.

UNISFA operates under a unique structure—initially composed primarily of Ethiopian troops—and has gradually integrated more diverse personnel, including female military and police officers. Their role, however, remains under-explored despite the rising global emphasis on women's participation in peacekeeping as reinforced by the Women, Peace, and Security agenda.

The Role of Female Peacekeepers in UN Missions

Female peacekeepers serve in various capacities across UN missions, including military, police, corrections, and civilian roles. Their presence brings unique strengths: they are often perceived as more approachable, play critical roles in addressing gender-based violence (GBV), and improve interactions with women and children in local communities. They also serve as role models, empowering local women and helping to break down traditional gender stereotypes.

In UNISFA, female peacekeepers have contributed to community outreach programs, protection activities, humanitarian assistance, and patrol operations. Their visibility challenges patriarchal norms in both host communities and their own militaries. Nonetheless, their numbers remain low, often due to institutional constraints in contributing countries and a lack of gender-sensitive policies in the mission environment.

Opportunities Presented by Female Peacekeepers in UNISFA

1. **Enhancing Community Engagement:** Female peacekeepers have proven particularly effective in engaging with local women in Abyei who may be reluctant to speak with male officers due to cultural norms. They help to gather critical intelligence, mediate local disputes, and build trust with civilians.
2. **Addressing Gender-Based Violence:** The presence of female personnel encourages victims of sexual and gender-based violence to come forward and report abuse. They also assist in conducting investigations and providing psychosocial support through coordinated efforts with humanitarian agencies.
3. **Promoting Women's Empowerment:** Female peacekeepers serve as powerful role models, inspiring local women to engage in peacebuilding, leadership, and civic activities. This aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (gender equality) and UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.
4. **Operational Effectiveness:** Studies have shown that mixed-gender teams are often more effective in peacekeeping tasks. Female peacekeepers contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the security environment, especially when dealing with women and children.

5. Constraints Facing Female Peacekeepers in a Volatile Environment

1. **Security and Operational Risks:** Abyei remains a high-risk area with recurring violence, limited infrastructure, and landmine threats. The hostile environment poses unique challenges to women, particularly those involved in field patrols or operating in remote outposts.
2. **Limited Representation and Leadership Roles:** While progress has been made, the proportion of women in UNISFA remains low, particularly in command positions. This limits their ability to influence policy and mission planning and affects the overall gender-responsiveness of operations.
3. **Institutional and Cultural Barriers:** Gender biases within contributing countries often result in fewer women being nominated for deployment. Additionally, cultural resistance in the host environment may restrict the participation of female peacekeepers in certain activities or interactions.
4. **Inadequate Support Systems:** Many missions, including UNISFA, face logistical and administrative challenges in supporting female personnel, such as lack of gender-sensitive accommodations, sanitati

on, and medical support.

Comparative Analysis: Lessons from Other UN Missions

Lessons from missions such as MONUSCO (Democratic Republic of Congo), UNMISS (South Sudan), and UNMIL (Liberia) provide valuable insights. These missions have seen positive outcomes from increased female participation, including better community relations, improved responses to GBV, and enhanced peacebuilding initiatives. However, they also mirror the structural constraints experienced in UNISFA, suggesting that broader UN reforms and stronger gender mainstreaming are necessary.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Increase Female Participation:** Contributing countries should be encouraged through incentives to deploy more female personnel, particularly in leadership roles.
2. **Enhance Training and Support:** Pre-deployment training should include gender-sensitive modules, and missions must provide adequate logistical support tailored to female personnel.
3. **Strengthen Institutional Frameworks:** UNISFA and other missions should institutionalize gender mainstreaming in all aspects of planning and execution.
4. **Promote Community-Based Gender Dialogues:** Missions should invest in local programs that foster gender equality and involve both men and women in peacebuilding.

Conclusion

Female peacekeepers in UNISFA play a crucial role in advancing peace and stability in the Abyei region. Their unique capabilities enhance mission performance and align with global commitments to gender equality and inclusive security. However, significant constraints continue to hinder their effectiveness. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated action by the UN, contributing countries, and host communities. As the UN continues to evolve its peacekeeping practices, empowering women in the field remains an indispensable priority.

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Author Profile

Jumanne Sauji is an officer in the Ministry of Defence, United Republic of Tanzania. He holds a Master of Arts in Defence and Security Studies from Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda. He also earned a Master of Laws in Procedural Laws and International Legal Practice from the University of Dar es Salaam. In addition, he holds a Postgraduate Diploma in Legal Practice and Judicial Training from the Law School of Tanzania, and a Bachelor of Laws degree from Tumaini University – Dar es Salaam College and an Advocate of the High Court of Tanzania and subordinate courts thereto save the primary Courts. Sauji brings a rich background in defence, legal, and international security affairs, having served in various strategic roles within the defence and security apparatus of Tanzania. His academic and operational expertise underpins his commitment to enhancing peacekeeping effectiveness and the integration of gender perspectives in peace and security operations. Currently he is at Abyei serving with the United Missions.