

Rationale of Female UN Peacekeepers: The Case of Indonesia

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Although female participation in UN peacekeeping has increased since the adoption of Resolution 1325 in 2000, numbers remain low. This article re-examines the rationale for enhancing women's roles—not as symbolic figures, but as contributors to operational effectiveness and catalysts for challenging gender biases in security. Focusing on Indonesia, which formally adopted gender mainstreaming in 2000 and a Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan in 2012, the study explores the structural and cultural barriers within a traditionally patriarchal military. Through comparative analysis and the narrative experiences of Indonesian female peacekeepers, the paper highlights both obstacles and opportunities. It contributes a nuanced framework for understanding gender in peacekeeping and offers policy recommendations to improve participation, using Indonesia's gradual cultural shift as a key reference point.

Keywords women, UN peacekeeping, gender, military, personnel

Introduction

The persistent underrepresentation of women in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations is not only a matter of statistical imbalance, but it also reflects deeper challenges in the mainstreaming of a gender perspective in the security and defense realms. Traditional military paradigms, which naturally extend themselves to peacekeeping as seventy-two percent of uniformed UN peacekeeping personnel are from the armed forces (UN Peacekeeping, "Military" n.d.), cast men as warriors and women as inherently vulnerable, unable to defend themselves, and thus reliant on men for protection (Timur 2016). Indeed, these stereotypes are reinforced by the reality of contemporary armed conflicts, where inevitably a sizeable proportion of casualties are civilians, often women (Tharoor 2024; European Institute for Gender Equality n.d.). Research, however, such as

that by Dharmapuri (2013), suggests that increasing female participation offers both moral and operational benefits. A growing body of literature indicates that a higher share of female peacekeepers can improve community engagement, enhance protection of civilians (especially women and children), widen the net for information gathering, and contribute to conflict de-escalation through their distinct interpersonal skills.

Since the UN Security Council (UNSC) adopted Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in 2000, the volume of studies on women in armed conflict has increased, as has encouragement for women to join military and peacekeeping operations. Nevertheless, women remain seriously underrepresented in these areas (UN Peacekeeping, “Gender Parity” n.d.), which continues the debate regarding whether the failure to meet policy targets for female representation in peacekeeping is largely symbolic or if it has significant practical implications. This study addresses the gap between the interest in women in military and peacekeeping forces and the reality of their ongoing underrepresentation in such operations by interrogating the relationship between women’s representation, gender equality, and peacekeeping outcomes. Importantly, this article contributes to the debate by reinterpreting existing research with a focus on the interplay between international norms and local military cultures.

A critical element of our inquiry is the selection of Indonesia, one of the UN’s principal Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs), as a case study. Since 1957, Indonesia has consistently deployed peacekeepers to UN missions. Not only is it the largest contributor of peacekeeping personnel among Southeast Asian countries (UN Peacekeeping 2023), but the case of Indonesia also exemplifies the tensions between formal gender-mainstreaming policies and entrenched patriarchal practices that are colored by its majority Muslim population (around ninety percent of its 270 million population [CIA n.d.]). The prevailing belief within the Indonesian Muslim faith reflects the local feminist narrative and the activism of female clerics that women are equal to men before God (Afrianty 2017). As such, Indonesia has been an enthusiastic albeit cautious adopter of UNSCR 1325, deploying small numbers of women peacekeepers in 2008 on the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) and, similarly, a year later on the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) (Sumertha, Saragih, and Astried 2021). By July 2023, Indonesia was deploying 115 female personnel on UNPKOs (UNSC, “Troop and Police Contributors” n.d.). More can be done, of course, but for both good and bad reasons, the experience of Indonesia is instructive for other developing Muslim states seeking to mobilise women to become important contributors to UN peacekeeping operations (UNPKOs). Comparing Indonesia’s performance with trends in other contributing countries, this article investigates whether its challenges are unique or part of a broader pattern of institutional and cultural resistance. In so doing, the article assesses whether the Indonesian experience

can serve as a lesson for other developing nations striving to adopt international gender norms while constrained by local traditions.

Historical Tracing and Literature Review of Women as Victims of Peacekeepers

Modern conflict invariably renders key elements of the Geneva Conventions redundant, including the rights of women. Article 27 of the Fourth Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (adopted in 1949) states, “Women shall be especially protected against any attack on their honour, in particular against rape, enforced prostitution, or any form of indecent assault.” Notwithstanding this powerful legal protection, gender-based persecution during war continues, as evidenced by the scholarship on women in armed conflict. Cases documented in such scholarship include the 1990-1999 Kashmir conflict, in which an estimated seven to sixteen thousand women were subjected to sexual abuse by both militants and the security forces (Agbajobi 2010); the 1992-1995 Bosnia conflict, in which more than fifty thousand women were sexually assaulted and suffered a form of ethnic cleansing (Hunt 2004); the 1994 Rwanda genocide, in which approximately five hundred thousand women were raped (UN 1996); and the conflict in the Middle East in the 2010s, in which the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant abducted at least 5,270 women (Sverdlov 2018). More recently, during the first year of the ongoing Ukraine-Russia war, there were a reported eighty-six cases of conflict-related sexual violence, perpetrated mostly by members of the Russian armed forces or law enforcement authorities (UN High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] and Save the Children UK 2022).

Recognition of the violence perpetrated against women in war and, indeed, in peace, has led to the institutional prioritization of gender protection and equality in the context of peace and security. A major milestone was Beijing’s 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women, which resulted in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action—a plan to combat all forms of violence against women, including in armed conflict. Then, in 2000, the UN Transitional Assistance Group in Windhoek launched the Namibia Plan of Action to ensure gender equality in peace operations (UNSC 2000a). In October 2000, the UNSC passed Resolution 1325, promoting meaningful participation of women in all peace processes, including in the armed forces and peacekeeping (UNSC 2000b). This latter legislation is particularly significant because, as will be made clear in this article, it provides the basis for more effective peacekeeping.

The adoption of Resolution 1325 represented a global shift toward having more women in the military. Yet twenty years on, women remain a small proportion of armed forces personnel across the world. Table 1 provides

Table 1. Military Personnel by Gender, Selected Countries (2022-24)

Country	Men in the AF	Women in the AF	Total
US	1,714,045	363,585	2,077,630
UK	141,320	16,680	158,000
Australia	67,400	17,500	84,900
China	1,910,000	90,000	2,000,000
Singapore	18,400	1,600	20,000
Indonesia	435,283	8,850	444,133

Sources: Authors' compilation based on the US Department of Defense (2023), Kirk-Wade (2024), Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022), Chetoui (2021), International Institute for Strategic Studies (n.d.), De Souza (2024), and Achmad (2023).

contemporary data on female representation for selected states.

Although female numbers remain low relative to their male counterparts, the disparities have reduced in recent years. Somewhat perversely, given the aforementioned enfeebled stereotype of women, women signed up in increasing numbers during the 2002-2021 Afghanistan conflict, which saw US female military participation increase by 1.4 percent between 2004 and 2018 (US Government Accountability Office 2020, 11), while Danish representation rose from 5.2 to 7.6 percent from 2007 to 2011 (Schaub et al. 2012) and Canadian forces experienced a remarkable growth in female numbers from 1.9 percent in 2001 to 17 percent in 2009 (Cawkill et al. 2009). In the UK and US, women are no longer excluded from any type of combat mission (Timur, Cooper, and Matthews 2016). Female military participation varies from country to country and across branches of armed forces. For instance, in the US, female participation has never been higher at sixteen percent of its overall military personnel in 2020, but while women represent nineteen percent of the Air Force, their participation rate is just eight percent in the Marine Corps (Robinson and O'Hanlon 2020). The share of female military in total peacekeeping forces has also been growing. The respected security think tank, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), reported in late 2022 that since the launch of the 2018 UN Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy, there has been a trend of increasing numbers and proportions of women military personnel in UN peace operations. Indeed, the proportion of women among military experts and staff officers has grown at a faster pace than the proportion of women among troops, with twenty-two percent of force commanders in UN peacekeeping operations being women (SIPRI 2022).

Numerous studies have examined why countries deploy women peacekeepers on UNPKOs. Kronsell (2012), for example, argues that the numbers of women in a country's armed forces can be linked to the proportion of female personnel sent on UNPKOs. When policymakers make decisions on the gender structure

of peacekeeping missions, they will inevitably be influenced by the prevailing small proportion of women in their armed forces. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the proportion of women deployed on UNPKOs will be similarly small. The findings of a study by Tidblad-Lundholm (2020) provide a foundational explanation for this argument, asserting that the numbers of female personnel sent on UNPKOs correspond with gender equality in the contributing country. Through a comparative analysis of female participation in the workforce against the deployment of female peacekeepers, the study determined that greater involvement of women in the workforce (reflecting a higher degree of gender equality) corresponded with greater deployment of female peacekeeping personnel.

A reverse logic, however, emerged in a study by Karim and Beardsley (2019) which found that if a “gendered protection norm” prevails in a country that is receiving peacekeepers, this will be associated with a low participation rate of women peacekeepers. Their research findings suggest that countries with low levels of female military representation are not only more likely to send a small number of women peacekeepers, but are also less likely to send women on missions to countries with low levels of development and high rates of conflict-related violence (Karim and Beardsley 2013). Adding further complexity to the debate, Crawford, Lebovic, and Macdonald (2015) offer an alternative explanation on why countries choose to deploy women in UNPKOs. The authors suggest that countries that respect human rights are more likely to deploy female personnel on international forces, reflecting their democratic and foreign policy values. Thus, sending female personnel on UN operations does not necessarily derive from a symbolic effort to do the right thing, but rather reflects the values held by the contributing state.

As part of incorporating a gender perspective into the security agenda, scholars have suggested several benefits that can be gained from including women in peacekeeping. A gender perspective sheds light on the experiences, needs, status, and priorities of men/boys and women/girls in relation to the mission’s mandate. Incorporating a gender perspective into a mission’s mandate is not the sole responsibility of a female gender adviser or female mission personnel, but the logic should have broader stakeholder appeal based on the revealed policy benefits of deploying women peacekeepers. There are three principal benefits of integrating women into UNPKOs. First, the UN, and indeed other international bodies, such as the International Labour Organization, have been under growing pressure to incorporate gender equality into the global development agenda (International Labour Organization 2012). Since 1995, when the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action called for increasing numbers of women in peacekeeping operations, there has been continuous emphasis on internalizing gender equality in the push for equal representation of women in UN operations (Rehn and Sirleaf 2002). Yet, gender equality is not simply about balancing the numbers of women and men in UNPKOs, it should also drive the

creation of opportunities for women to enjoy greater role diversity, responsibility, and representation. The establishment of gender equality in UNPKOs has the potential to inspire, influence, and encourage the host country government to promote greater participation of women in the local political and security sectors. Moreover, empowering women to operate on an equal basis with their male colleagues will improve overall performance, making it more likely that the mission's mandate will be fulfilled in a meaningful way (Dharmapuri 2013).

Second, prioritizing gender equality is obviously the morally appropriate policy, but as stated above, it also carries the very real possibility of boosting operational effectiveness of peace operations. The argument's central premise is that greater female participation will offer enhanced protection of civilians, particularly women and children. Numerous studies have found that despite receiving the same military training as men, women tend to be less aggressive and confrontational (Simić 2010). Mazurana and Piza-Lopez (2002) observe that women officers are less likely to use force or inappropriately discharge their weapons during conflict situations. Studies further indicate that the presence of women peacekeepers reduces tension. This could be due to women being perceived as less of a threat than their male colleagues (Karamé 2001). Women peacekeepers may enhance mission outputs because their relatively higher emotional quotient acts to calm tense encounters, leading to more satisfactory outcomes of security tasks (Dharmapuri 2013). This is especially the case in difficult gender-sensitive situations, such as conducting body searches of women, working with female prisoners, escorting victims and witnesses of sexual violence, and screening female combatants at disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) sites. In such situations, women peacekeepers intuitively possess an obvious, but in reality, little-considered comparative operational advantage. Women police officers and soldiers can frequently access and interview greater numbers of the local population, comprising women, boys and girls, especially in cultural contexts where men external to the local community are prohibited from having direct interaction with local women. An additional important consideration is that local women are more likely to disclose sexual violence to female peacekeepers than to male peacekeepers. UNSC Resolution 1888, adopted in 2009, indicates that "women and children affected by armed conflict may feel more secure working with women UN peacekeepers, as well as reporting abuse to them, and that their presence may encourage local women to participate in the national armed and security forces" (UNSC 2009).

Third, developing situational awareness is likely to result in a more detailed, comprehensive, and nuanced understanding of the operational environment, which in turn will lower uncertainty and contribute to the prevention of unexpected negative outcomes. Information gathering and analysis are likely to improve when the differential impact of armed conflict on women and men is taken into consideration, based on the experiences of NATO, the UN, and

respective member states. Investigations into the individual experiences of men and women in conflict-affected areas can provide a comprehensive picture of situational characteristics, including the identity of influential individuals, access to resources, kinship, patronage networks, and the security threats, risks, interests, and needs of the community. As such, the presence of female peacekeepers can bolster the local community's acceptance of a UN peacekeeping force. For instance, analysis of the missions in Namibia, South Africa, and Rwanda led to the discovery that "in all these operations, women police peacekeepers were perceived by locals as less threatening, more willing to listen and better able to diffuse potentially violent situations" (Dharmapuri 2013, 7).

Since the inception of the UN in 1945, only small numbers of woman personnel have been deployed on UNPKOs. Between 1957 and 1979, only five women were among the 6,250 deployed peacekeeping troops (0.08 percent), which rose slightly to a meagre twenty among the twenty thousand military personnel deployed (one percent) when considered across a longer period, 1957-1989 (UN Division for the Advancement of Women 1995). In other words, across three decades, women constituted no more than one percent of the total peacekeeping personnel deployed by all UN contributing countries, and it was not until 1995 that the UN introduced a mandate to deploy women peacekeeping personnel. The UN's belated commitment to recruiting women for peacekeeping operations was not only driven by its attempt to remedy this gender rights anomaly, but also by efforts to repair reputational damage caused by revelations of sexual and gender-based violence perpetrated by its peacekeepers. Allegations of sexual abuse committed by peacekeepers first surfaced in a 1992 publication released in Mozambique, and shortly afterwards similar concerns surfaced in Cambodia, Somalia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, undermining the UN's peacekeeping credentials (Simić 2012).

Men are overwhelmingly the perpetrators of sexual exploitation, and the revelations of sexual abuse by UNPKO personnel are consistent with this reality. An obvious first move to repair the damage was to change the UN's male-dominated staffing model. Thus, in the mid-to-late-1990s, the UN initiated a robust campaign to encourage TCCs to assign more women to peacekeeping operations. This had the ancillary benefit of increasing the multinational forces' capacities to provide appropriate assistance to local populations, especially women, boys, and girls (Shoemaker and Adams-Alwine 2010). In this regard, the impact of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security represented a significant benchmark, highlighting women's meaningful participation in peace processes. Importantly, the resolution obliges all member countries to incorporate a gender perspective into peace negotiations, humanitarian planning, peacekeeping operations, post-conflict peacebuilding, and governance. It also emphasized the imperative of effective protection for women from sexual violence in conflict, along with the need to mainstream a gender perspective into all sectors of

Table 2. Military, Police, and Total of Personnel Deployed on UNPKOs (February 2024)

Military			Police			Grand Total		
Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
53,183	4,715	57,898	5,222	1,369	6,591	58,405	6,084	64,489

Source: Authors’ compilation based on UN Peacekeeping (2024).

peacekeeping operations. The growing numbers of UN resolutions promoting female participation in UNPKOs reflect a greater awareness of women’s important contributions to peace. Of the eleven UN peacekeeping missions currently deployed, nine have mandates that explicitly include women, peace, and security (WPS) language (UN Peacekeeping, “Where We Operate” n.d.).

These various policy measures have had a positive impact on the deployment of women peacekeepers. As Table 2 demonstrates, by February 2024, female personnel engaged on UN missions had dramatically increased, surpassing six thousand. Relatively, however, women remain dramatically underrepresented in UNPKOs, accounting for just 9.4 percent of uniformed military, police, and corrections personnel on UN field missions (UN Peacekeeping, “Women in Peacekeeping” n.d.). Consequently, the UN has plans to raise female representation on UNPKOs. For example, the UN aims to have women represent around fifteen percent of military contingents and twenty-five percent of military observers and staff officers by 2028 (ibid.). This push builds on the 2009 UN Police Division’s Global Effort initiative to employ more women as police officers in national police services and deploy greater numbers of women on UN police operations around the globe (UN Police n.d.). The 2028 primary target for women serving in organized police units is twenty percent, while the target for officers is thirty percent (UN Peacekeeping 2019).

In its 2015 Report to the General Assembly, the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations identified several areas in which UNPKOs were severely lacking. The report expressly recognizes that “15 years on [from the adoption of UNSCR 1325] there remains a poor understanding of the potential of both integrating a gendered perspective and increasing the participation of women at all levels of political and civil life, most especially at the leadership level” (UNGA 2015, 15). Moreover, in 2020, at the twenty-year commemoration of UNSCR 1325, WPS priorities were mentioned as a key political commitment in the UN Secretary-General’s initiative, Action for Peacekeeping. This measures countries’ peacekeeping contributions, including the numbers of women deployed on missions, and “it is clear that much more remains to be done” (UN Peacekeeping 2020).

Challenges of Taking Theory and UN Policy into Real-Life Peacekeeping

Notwithstanding these institutional good intentions, numerous factors constrain the achievement of gender mainstreaming and balancing in UNPKOs. To begin, questions have been raised over the operational effectiveness of mainstreaming. Recent research suggests that efforts to mainstream WPS norms simply instrumentalizes women, putting them into specialized spaces that reflect gender “sidestreaming” (Von Hlatky 2022). This reinforces the view that the culture within international peacekeeping contingents, and the military in general, still retains a masculine dominance. This particularly applies to the disparity of power between genders, resulting in a restricted level of participation for women on peacekeeping missions. The disparity also hinders women’s involvement in terms of employment opportunities, thereby perpetuating discrimination and violence. For example, a 2002 survey by the UNHCR and Save the Children UK on peace operations in Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, found that sixty-seven individuals—mainly men in the community with power and money—and forty-two agencies allegedly obtained sexual favors from youngsters. Perceptions of how male peacekeepers interact with local women/girls appear to differ between countries. For example, a 2024 comparative study between Haiti and the Democratic Republic of Congo found that in the former the dominant local perception was that peacekeepers offered “financial support and protection” while for the latter they were perceived as being in a “position of authority” (Vahedi et al. 2024, 372).

Yet, efforts to dilute the dominance of male peacekeepers is challenging due to the stringent qualifications and prerequisites women face in joining UN peacekeeping forces. The consequence of insufficient relevant training while maintaining broad deployment criteria, such as level of experience, possession of a driving license, and weapon-handling skills, limit women’s participation (Coomaraswamy 2015). Indeed, some observers argue that the absence of general combat skills, due to many TCCs disallowing female participation in Ground Close Combat, may deter women from applying for UNPKOs, with further discouragement from national authorities refusing to deploy women on testing missions involving rough conditions (Beardsley and Karim 2015). For example, the majority of peacekeepers on the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali originate from African TCCs, and many do not include women among their peacekeeping personnel. This is likely due to the harsh climatic conditions found in northern Mali, poor living conditions, and an asymmetrical threat environment in which over a hundred (primarily African) peacekeepers have been killed (Cold-Ravnkilde, Albrecht, and Haugegaard 2016). There is also the likelihood that the gender perspective is ignored in practice (Lorentzen 2024).

A further set of obstacles relate to the working environment and practical

barriers found on certain assignments, especially discrimination, lack of facilities and under-exploitation of skills. There have been numerous reports regarding unequal and discriminatory treatment of deployed female peacekeepers, often caused by gender stereotyping (Karim and Beardsley 2017). According to the International Peace Institute, women peacekeepers invariably use equipment designed for the “standard” (i.e., male) body type that is unsuitable and unsafe for women (Baldwin and Taylor 2020). If a mission is not equipped with protective gear tailored to women’s body types, female personnel may be unable to participate in patrol operations, forcing them to remain at the base. Women have also reported that on-base accommodations for sleeping and bathing are either limited or unsegregated and their access to health services is difficult. Additionally, women are frequently relegated to civilian roles and administrative responsibilities on peacekeeping operations. Such stereotyping prevents them from fully utilizing their experience and abilities in suitable positions (Karim 2017). Indeed, even when women have equal access to skilled and responsible roles, there is a suspicion that they are held to a higher standard of performance than their male counterparts (Baldwin and Taylor 2020). Stereotypes and taboos regarding women joining peacekeeping operations are partially due to the TCC’s diverse cultural, military, and political backgrounds. For instance, women with children who participate in UNPKOs are invariably perceived as “bad mothers” and accused of abandoning their parental duties. Women also face the related problem that most peacekeeping operations are not equipped with the physiological and biological amenities necessary to adequately support female peacekeepers who attend to familial responsibilities (Pruitt 2016).

There is also an apparent reluctance by TCCs to deploy women peacekeepers due to the risk of sexual abuse. Karim and Beardsley’s (2017) study indicates that contributing countries are reluctant to deploy female peacekeepers to areas where there is a heightened risk of gender-based violence. For example, India hesitates to send women peacekeepers to areas prone to sexual violence, as it is wedded to the idea that its women are nation bearers, embodying the values and dignity of their societies (Klosseka and Johansson-Nogués 2021). Thus, any harm an enemy inflicts on a woman’s body is equated to harm against the Indian nation. Yet, ironically, recent research findings suggest that woman peacekeepers are more concerned about their safety in military camps and bases than during operations (Baldwin and Taylor 2020). Such concerns are consistent with statistical evidence indicating that women face an increased risk of sexual abuse by other personnel during deployment. Sexual mistreatment in the security services cannot solely be attributed to individual opportunistic behavior but rather is a systemic problem. It is embedded within a culture of impunity associated with “hazing”; that is, a culture of unchecked military masculinity (ibid.). The related concept of “brotherhood” makes it difficult for victims and witnesses to report misconduct by colleagues, as they fear retaliation for their betrayal. The UN has

taken significant steps towards addressing sexual misconduct, primarily focusing on external contacts, such as the interactions between peacekeepers and local populations, but more must be done to address sexual misconduct within the UN itself.

Peacekeeping in Indonesia as an Entry-Point for Women

For the case study of Indonesia, peacekeeping is viewed as integral to the country's peace-oriented constitution, with the politics of peacekeeping beginning as early as 1956. Before the country's independence, however, formidable women warriors opposed the Dutch colonists—Nyi Ageng Serang and Martha Tiahahu fought against the Dutch in the 1880s and Cut Nyak Dhien, a local female warlord, fought against Dutch colonizers in the Battle of Aceh between 1873 and 1904. In 1948, following Indonesia's independence, the Women Corps of Indonesian Police (Wanita POLRI) was established. Female corps were also established in the Indonesian Army, Navy and Air Force between 1961 and 1963. Then in 2000, Indonesia issued its Presidential Instructions on Gender-Mainstreaming (INPRES No. 9/2000), followed by the adoption of UNSCR 1325 into its National Action Plan in 2012. These measures aimed to have all government agencies—including military and police forces—incorporate gender mainstreaming into all planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation policies.

Indonesia's strong commitment to promoting the peace and security agenda in Southeast Asia and the greater Indo-Pacific region derives from its desire to prove itself in the wake of its 1998 transition from authoritarian military rule to democracy (Anwar 2020). Democracy values merit-based promotion and fairness of opportunity for everyone, including for women to play a greater role in military and peacekeeping operations. Embracing these values, generated reputational dividends for Indonesia's military forces (Sambhi 2021). Indeed, at the heart of Indonesia's foreign policy is the concept of peaceful coexistence, widely known as the doctrine of *bebas-aktif*, or “independent and active”; that is, the country is “neutral, but free to determine attitudes and policies towards international issues...for the purpose of realising a world order based on freedom and eternal peace” (Simatupang, and Panggabean 2022, 591). In the early 2000s, after overcoming domestic economic-political crises and the embarrassment of being on the receiving end of a UN-sanctioned intervention force in East Timor, Indonesia prioritized sending its military and police on UN peacekeeping missions, having a gender sensitive angle (Kane 1996).

Since then, Indonesia has attempted to rehabilitate itself within the international peacekeeping community by contributing increased numbers of personnel to an expanding number of missions as a fundamental component of its foreign policy. In 2004, then-president Yudhoyono deployed 144 military

engineers and medical staff to the peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO). Then in 2006, in response to a request from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, Indonesian troops were sent to Lebanon (UNIFIL). By 2010, Indonesia was among the top twenty UN peacekeeping TCCs. In 2012, Indonesia raised the bar by declaring its goal of becoming one of the world's top ten TCCs, with more than four thousand troops in the field (Capie 2016). This ambition was achieved through larger deployments, including battalion-size forces sent to Lebanon, Darfur, and Mali. In 2014, Indonesia became the single largest contributor to UNIFIL (Lebanon), reflecting its increased peacekeeping profile, which was further underscored by the appointment of an Indonesian officer as Force Commander of the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (UN 2013). Under President Yudhoyono, Indonesia not only increased its military peacekeeping personnel, but also its contribution of police to UNPKOs. Further expanding its influence, Indonesia's engagement went beyond supplying UN peacekeepers to also providing equipment. For example, Indonesia supplied maritime vessels in support of UNIFIL operations in 2012, as well as three Mi-17V-5 transport helicopters in 2013 to support the Darfur campaign (Sambhie 2013).

The inclusion of women into Indonesia's security sector has been encouraged through a swathe of government initiatives. At the international level, Indonesia's commitment to raising the profile of women in peace processes is viewed as one of its primary strategies for achieving world peace. In fact, an element of Indonesia's successful 2019-2020 campaign to become a non-permanent member of the UNSC was its commitment to raising female participation in UN peacekeeping, especially in conflict areas where many of the victims are women and children (Azizah et al. 2021). Under Indonesia's presidency of the UNSC in 2020, the Council adopted Resolution 2538 regarding the role of female personnel on UN peacekeeping missions, representing the first time the UNSC had addressed the status of women in UNPKOs (True, Gayatri, and Veronika 2020). The push to adopt UNSCR 2538 emphasized Indonesia's priority for both peace diplomacy and enhancing the role of women in UN peacekeeping missions. The Resolution embraced several key policy domains, including the increased establishment of networks and databases and improvement in the safety, security, and provision of special facilities for female personnel. It is rare for all members of the UNSC to collectively co-sponsor a resolution, but the Indonesian-sponsored Resolution 2538 achieved this and was supported by ninety-seven states, including all UNSC members (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Ankara, Turkey 2020). Indonesia also played a significant role regionally, establishing the ASEAN Women Mediators Network and hosting regional training throughout 2019-2020 on women, peace, and security. Nationally, the Indonesian Peace and Security Centre was established in Sentul, West Java, and is regarded as one of the top-tier peacekeeping training centers in Southeast Asia. Importantly, gender and

human rights are incorporated into the curriculum. The Centre is linked to parallel initiatives aimed at encouraging women to contribute actively to the establishment of peace, including in the formation of the Afghanistan-Indonesian Women Solidarity Network (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Kabul, Afghanistan 2020).

While these policies have supported the increased deployment of Indonesian female peacekeepers from 1.96 percent in 2010 to 6.2 percent in 2024, questions remain about the absolute numbers of women peacekeepers in this expansion process (UN Peacekeeping, “Contribution of Uniformed Personnel” 2024). Not only is the proportion shy of the UN’s seven percent target that Indonesia had hoped to meet by 2020, but it also represents only 168 of the 2,717 Indonesian peacekeepers deployed (UN Peacekeeping 2023). The country’s largest deployment recorded is to UNIFIL (1,213 troops and 17 staff officers), which includes only thirty-four or 2.3 percent female personnel (*ibid.*). There is also a significant Indonesian deployment to MONUSCO, with 1,019 Indonesian troops stationed in the Democratic Republic of Congo, but this includes just thirty-seven females, around 3.6 percent of its deployed personnel (UN Peacekeeping, “Contribution of Uniformed Personnel” 2024). Missing the UN target of seven percent is disappointing, not least because it represents a failure to fully implement UNSCR 1325. However, Indonesia deployed quantitatively more women (177 personnel) than those with higher percentages of deployment, such as Japan (two female peacekeepers, representing fifty percent of its deployment), Greece (twenty-nine female peacekeepers, representing twenty-two percent), and Brazil (sixteen female peacekeepers, representing twenty percent).

For Indonesia, the challenge lies in the extremely low percentage of women recruited to join either the Indonesian National Armed Forces (Tentara Nasional Indonesia [TNI]) or the Indonesian National Police (POLRI). The problem is evidenced by the results of the 2022 census of TNI personnel, which revealed that of its 444,133 soldiers, only 8,850 were female, representing just two percent of all soldiers (Dewi 2022). A similar gender imbalance exists in the POLRI, where total personnel amounts to 450,000, but only about 25,700 are female police officers, which represents less than six percent of the total police force (Wibowo 2022). Additionally, a female member of the military deployed to MONUSCO noted, “Despite our pre-deployment training, the lack of gender-specific facilities when we went patrolling, such as a lavatory, often undermines our ability to perform effectively, we just have to make do. It reminded us that despite global gender mainstreaming attempts, local support takes time to develop” (authors’ phone interview with Major R. K., Indonesian female peacekeeper deployed to MONUSCO, January 30, 2025).

There is no single reason for Indonesia’s increased deployment of women peacekeepers, but Hutabarat (2017) and Azizah, Maksun, and Hidayatulloh (2020) partially attribute the increase across 2009–2016 to a perception that

adopting a consistent and prominent position on international security will positively impact Indonesia's reputation as an emerging country. Arguably, the driving force behind Indonesia's increase in female peacekeepers was its first female foreign minister, Retno Marsudi, who is widely regarded as a champion of the WPS agenda. Minister Marsudi publicly stated at the UNSC Open Debate in March 2018 that the UN should deploy more female uniformed peacekeepers as they can win the hearts and minds of the locals (Anyu 2018). Marsudi pushed the gender dynamics in a male-dominated, masculine state institution and is credited with raising the voice of national "femocrats" (feminist bureaucrats) in shaping Indonesia's foreign policy on the WPS agenda (Azizah et al. 2021). Marsudi's influence led to an increased focus on Indonesian gender-mainstreaming peacekeeping diplomacy through both her promotion of the WPS agenda in the UN, and her participation in the first women-only foreign minister meeting in Canada (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia 2019). Going forward, under male foreign ministers, it is unlikely that Indonesia will reach the same level of female empowerment in its peacekeeping deployment.

In addition to the influence of the foreign minister, President Widodo's government (2014-2024) continued prioritizing peacekeeping by launching Roadmap Vision 4000 Peacekeepers, 2015-2019, which aimed to create four thousand active Garuda Contingent troops by 2019 (UNDP 2020). The policy signified high-level support for gender equality on peacekeeping missions and represented a microcosm of President Widodo's broader policy approach to making gender equality a cornerstone of his presidency. Indeed, he became an ambassador for the UN Women #HeforShe campaign and announced his intention to fill the cabinet with strong, smart, and capable women (Dunstan and Bhardwaj 2019). In May 2019, Indonesia held two UNSC discussions centered on peacekeeping: one on civilian protection and the other on training. The latter discussion was particularly important, as it focused on the training of women peacekeepers with the aim of establishing leadership credentials to break the male-dominated mold. Then, as mentioned earlier, during Indonesia's UNSC presidency in August 2020, the Council adopted Resolution 2538, representing a commitment to enhance and support women on UNPKOs (UNSC 2020). The cumulative result of these policies was that in March 2024, Indonesia became the world's sixth biggest TCC (UN Peacekeeping, "Contribution of Uniformed Personnel" 2024).

While President Widodo demonstrated unwavering commitment to Indonesian participation, including women, in UNPKOs, the position of newly-inaugurated (October 2024) President Prabowo Subianto is less clear. Indeed, his views on Indonesian women peacekeepers may not become apparent until long after he assumes power. What is known, though, is that the role of women in Indonesian society and politics was a contentious issue in the election campaign. Indonesia ranks eighty-fifth out of 156 countries in the 2021 Global Gender

Gap Report, indicating a wide disparity between men and women in economic participation, educational attainment, and political empowerment (Jasmine 2024). There are questions whether the new president is committed to promoting reform, with some commentators openly arguing that his views on women's rights and gender equality are outdated and misogynistic. Indeed, there are fears, stemming from Prabowo's alleged involvement in crimes against resistance fighters and women during Indonesia's 1975-2002 occupation of Timor-Leste, that the country will regress on democracy and human rights achievements (Pereira and Chen 2024).

More than statistics, Indonesian women's participation in UNPKOs arguably raised the effectiveness of UN peacekeeping operations through a more sensible and caring approach to war victims, contributing to the establishment of sustainable peace in conflict zones (Hadi and Soesilowati 2018). There is evidence to support the view that Indonesian women peacekeepers have exerted a positive impact on UNPKO outcomes. Indonesian women peacekeepers shared their stories on how they often support local women and children through civil-military community engagement activities, including humanitarian assistance, teaching, and provision of medical facilities, and by facilitating ceasefires and the peace process. Scholarship indicates that Indonesian female peacekeepers are trained to secure inclusive peace processes that actualize local women's aspirations of social and political rights, especially via local psychological recovery and social development, to promote durable resolutions to conflict (Fadillah et al. 2020).

Thus, while Indonesia has grown the proportion of women engaged in UNPKOs, it continues to face obstacles in its efforts to enlist greater numbers of females. Perceived as constrained by familial duties, for example, married women are required to submit consent letters from their partners before they can be deployed on a mission. Moreover, female personnel do not feature in infantry and combat battalions due to limitations, such as requirements that they only work in "gender-suitable" roles and the lack of supporting infrastructure (Handayani 2008). A major constraint on female recruitment to security forces has been Indonesia's hyper-masculinized military and police culture, leading to constraints on promotion and admissions opportunities for women. With respect to training, a presidential decree on gender mainstreaming was adopted in 2000, but Indonesia's military academy stalled its female intakes until 2013—an unconscionable delay. Prospective female cadets were only able to enroll for the military through non-commissioned officer candidate schools (*Sekolah Calon Bintara*), which reduced their appointment opportunities for key military positions compared to their male counterparts graduating from military academies (Arbi 2020).

Additionally, Indonesian female military candidates complained about the unprofessional entry requirement of virginity testing. Reportedly, high-ranking Indonesian officials have deemed the test to be relevant, arguing that it measures

the personality and mentality of the person, thus also signifying the morality of female military candidates, regardless of sufficient mental, academic, and physical capability. Non-virginal women are perceived as prone to bad habits, contradicting the expected character of military personnel as protectors of the nation. The hymen's physical appearance is said to indicate whether the applicant has a history of premarital intercourse, which is forbidden (Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Indonesia 2015). This controversial regulation captured the world's attention, condemning the process as unfair and traumatizing for women. In 2014, Human Rights Watch exposed the use of virginity tests by Indonesia's police and military, and in November of the same year, the World Health Organization (2014) published guidelines further confirming that virginity tests (or "two-finger" tests) have no scientific validity. Yet, notwithstanding the growing controversy, TNI continued to use the test—virginity tests were not officially abolished until 2022 (Yahya, Nasrudin, and Meiliana 2022). Indonesia's virginity test has been recognized internationally as a human rights violation, an act that is "cruel, inhuman or degrading" under Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Article 16 of the Convention against Torture, both of which have been ratified by many countries, including Indonesia.

Conclusions

More than twenty years after the launch of UNSCR 1325, UNPKOs remain male-dominated. In 2024, women represented just 9.4 percent of UN peacekeeping personnel, and while this proportion is significantly higher than the one percent achieved during 1957-1989, the participation rate clearly needs to increase. While the growth of female participation in peacekeeping missions is constrained, the quality of their roles also remains questionable. This is unfortunate as findings from the field show that having women deployed in peace missions increases operational effectiveness and provides institutional transformation by helping to change deep-seated cultural norms. Indonesia acknowledges the importance of women's engagement in UNPKOs, and while their contributions have been meaningful, their potential has not been optimized (Dewi, Satya, and Arsanti 2020). Practical experience reveals that women's roles in peacekeeping missions are largely restricted to activities that align with stereotypical societal duties assigned to women, such as clerical staff and desk jobs; men, meanwhile, are assigned more operational frontline activities. Yet, studies suggest that women peacekeepers offer enhanced support and security to women and child victims in conflict zones.

Indonesia is a compelling case study because in the process of achieving the distinction of becoming the sixth biggest contributor to UNPKOs, it has made strenuous efforts to embrace gender equality through a succession of gender-

friendly policies targeting military and police peacekeepers. As a Muslim-majority country, the challenges are profound, with deeply entrenched religious roots influencing, if not defining, the role of women in society. Gender equality has to battle the cultural and religious conventions and interpretations that constrain societal and institutional endorsement of greater female participation in UNPKOs (Cholil 2017). Indonesia has had to navigate around these domestic politico-economic and moral obstacles. Clearly, the institutional commitment is in place, but at the time of writing this article, women still represent only a tiny proportion of the country's peacekeeping forces. Moreover, there is uncertainty about how the newly-elected President Prabowo's administration will approach gender equality and peacekeeping.

Based on existing literature and the prescriptions within UN policy, raising the number of women in UNPKOs is important; the implementation, however, remains a work-in-progress. To address these challenges, several policy recommendations are suggested. Countries need to improve recruitment and training protocols and develop gender-specific support infrastructure. Globally, the UN needs to maintain data indicators to track progress regarding female peacekeepers—deployment numbers, deployment areas, and roles within the missions—which can help encourage women to take leadership roles. Additionally, the Indonesia case study demonstrates that explicit government commitment on women, peace, and security is important to push for improving procedures and expanding opportunities for women to serve in the security and defense sectors, which in the long run will increase the number of female peacekeepers deployed. Lastly, there is need for more research that combines quantitative and qualitative approaches to better understand the progress and opportunities of gender integration in peace operations.

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