Gender perspectives in the control and management of unregulated weapons and ammunition in UN peace support operations

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Introduction

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) represents a milestone in UN activities related to international peace and security (UNSC, 2000). It was the starting point of the WPS Agenda and the introduction of policies and practices aimed at incorporating a gender perspective not only within the UN itself and its member states, but also within PSOs. The WPS Agenda encourages member states to increase the participation of women in all decision-making positions in national, regional, and international institutions and mechanisms for conflict prevention and resolution. It also calls for consideration of the particular needs of women and girls in conflict and post-conflict situations.

Against this backdrop, this paper discusses the integration of a gender perspective into the management and control of weapons and ammunition in PSOs, where the proliferation of small arms and light weapons remains a great challenge. It focuses on gender mainstreaming as a significant strategy—or tool—to implement relevant policies and practices in what can be extremely challenging environments.

Background

Gender mainstreaming is defined as the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, at all levels:

> It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes … so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated (UNESC, 1997, ch. IV, para. 4.IA).

Over the 18 years that have passed since Resolution 1325 was adopted the UN has stressed the relevance of women's active participation in conflict prevention, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding, calling on its member states to promote equal conditions in international peace and security activities. Since 2000, Resolution 1325 has been enhanced with seven other Security Council resolutions, namely: 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1889 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013), 2122 (2013), and 2242 (2015).[1]

Together they constitute the WPS Agenda, whose content can be divided into two main areas of focus:

- women's empowerment and active participation; and
- the prevention of and protection of women from conflict-related sexual violence.

The use of firearms negatively affects both areas.

Gender mainstreaming in PSOs

According to the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs, more than 80 per cent of the global ammunition trade goes unreported or is poorly documented (UNODA, n.d.). Arms and ammunition stockpiles and modes of transport are also frequently inappropriate for the preservation and safeguarding of such materials.

The UN has made great efforts in, and devoted considerable resources to, avoiding the loss of arms and ammunition in PSOs. This is a particularly challenging task in hostile environments where illegal activities may be rife and a volatile stability jeopardizes the lives of local civilians and UN personnel.

WAM in PSOs is necessary in order to ensure the three aspects of human security: freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom from indignity (IAIHR, n.d.). The proliferation of illicit weapons and ammunition seriously affects all three areas, but most especially interferes with the freedom to live without fear. The WPS Agenda offers a comprehensive and multi-sectoral approach to involving both female peacekeepers and local women in peacebuilding, with a view to ensuring freedom from fear.

Following Resolution 1325 (2000), Resolution 2122 (2013) encouraged TCCs/PCCs to increase the percentage of women in UN PSOs (UNSC, 2013b). This supports their inclusion as role models for women from conflict-affected communities, especially those characterized by dominant male supremacy and unequal conditions. Resolution 2122 also called for women's full participation and protection in political processes, DDR programmes, and security sector and judicial reforms (UNSC, 2013b, para. 4).

Aside from the inclusion of women in PSOs, gender mainstreaming in WAM in PSOs requires an assessment of how the proliferation of arms in conflicts affects women and men differently. The identification of vulnerable sub-groups is an essential part of this. Girls forced to become servants or 'wives' of combatants experience abuses and violence differently, for example, from young boys forced to join armed groups and use firearms, very often against their own families or community members. Gender mainstreaming also requires the ability to recognize the differential impact of peacekeepers and their security activities on males and females, when protecting communities in conflict-affected societies (see Box 1).

Box 1 Gender mainstreaming in URUBAT

Uruguay has been involved in UN PSOs since 1952. The first women were deployed in Uruguayan contingents in 1993. More than 2,000 Uruguayan women have deployed since then in increasingly senior positions, moving from administrative and logistical assignments in the early days, to more operational and tactical functions as part of battalion headquarter staff and other decision-making positions in deployed units. In 2017 Uruguay was ranked 11th globally in deploying female personnel to PSOs and is the premier source of female peacekeepers in Latin America (Barceló, 2017).

Uruguayan personnel have been deployed in the DRC since 1999, where female peacekeepers currently represent almost 6 per cent (5.4 per cent troops and police) of its personnel in MONUSCO (SINOMAPA, 2018). This is a significant number for a mission, although it can and should be improved on. Uruguayan female peacekeepers in URUBAT play a role in exchanging information with local people and providing humanitarian assistance to women and children in remote areas that are difficult to access. Cpt. Ana Lucas was a member of URUBAT deployed as part of MONUSCO in 2010. She had the remarkable experience of commanding 43 men in her DDR team, when she was deployed in operations in the Busurungi jungle in eastern DRC (de los Santos, 2015, p. 395).

UN guidance

The UNDPKO and UNDFS publication entitled *DPKO/DFS Guidelines: Integrating a Gender Perspective into the Work of the United Nations Military in Peacekeeping Operations* provides a series of tools to assist with the implementation of the various WPS mandates at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels (UNDPKO and UNDFS, 2010). They provide peacekeepers with guidelines on protection of civilians (POC) activities, including by providing a verification list for each level and many examples of how to integrate a gender perspective into peacekeeping work. Suggestions include:

- employing joint assessment teams to define patrolling routes in consultation with local women;
- deploying female military personnel to support activities to protect women and girls;
- consulting and drawing on the perspectives of women and men to gain a comprehensive picture of the security environment; and
- incorporating provisions on strengthening the participation of local women in peacekeeping activities and enhancing the protection of women and girls in strategic planning documents (UNDPKO and UNDFS, 2010, pp. 15–17, 26–28, 36–38).

In recent years the UN has embraced the challenge of incorporating more women into the military component of PSOs. As discussed below, female peacekeepers are now recognized as being crucial at an operational level—for instance, during patrolling and reconnaissance activities, in gathering information, and in providing first-level assistance to victims.

Female peacekeepers and the protection of civilians

Gathering information is particularly relevant to fulfilling POC mandates. PSO field experience indicates that in certain male-dominated societies experiencing conflict, a local woman approaching a man to seek help or to provide him with information can be physically threatening to her. It can also jeopardize a male peacekeeper's safety and that of his team, in a cultural context where such an approach could be considered an intrusion. The presence of female peacekeepers has been proved to enhance the exchange of information and to generate an atmosphere of trust in PSOs (UNGA and UNSC, 2015, para. 212).

Processing information with a gender perspective also requires a deep understanding of the roles of both women and men in a society, as well as their specific safety concerns and vulnerabilities. The UN and TCCs have made great efforts to improve training on POC issues, and peacekeepers are now much better able to read relevant signs and respond to these, both proactively and preventatively. For example, internally displaced people may be fleeing from certain areas or women may be absent from markets or commonly used roads. When not linked to a specific hostile confrontation, such events provide clear evidence of civilian populations under threat.

Searching for illegal or lost weapons and ammunition in vehicles, on premises, and as part of body searches is another key activity associated with POC mandates. Cultural patterns often prevent men from searching women or from searching premises if there is a woman inside. Aware of this reality, local insurgents usually store their illegal arms and ammunition in civilians' homes. By taking part in search operations, women in patrols and search teams can have a direct impact on the chances of arms being recovered, while also discouraging illegal storage.

A gender perspective in DDR programmes

Women in insurgent groups can assume a variety of different roles. They sometimes obtain arms and ammunition, store them, or directly use them. In many cases they are forced to fulfil other 'support' roles such as servants, cooks, or even sexual slaves. Girls as young as eight years old may be forced to join armed groups. Today's DDR programmes are meant to be sensitive to, and provide for, girls and women's special needs, taking into account the discrimination they may face when reintegrating back into societies where traditional values systematically privilege males over females, depriving them of every dimension of their autonomy.

Both the DRC and Colombia DDR processes offer key lessons on how a successful process with a gender perspective considerably reduces the chances of a demobilized person taking up arms again. It is necessary to carefully assess the local context to identify the composition of groups taking part in such programmes (whether males, female, minors, or other vulnerable groups such as the disabled), as well as the types and numbers of weapons involved, and areas of return for resettlement and reintegration.

Furthermore, every DDR process is unique. Cultural and gender awareness are vital to the successful reintegration of men and women back into their communities, by providing them with alternatives other than taking up arms and joining armed groups (Idris, 2016, p. 2). DDR programmes that are understood as part of a process of *social reconciliation* aiming to achieve sustainable peace and involving both (ex-) combatants and non-combatants necessarily require a gender perspective. This is crucial to overcoming the major stigma experienced by women who have been part of armed groups, for example (Jiménez Sānchez, 2014, pp. 10–12). The roles of men and women in any demobilized group should be understood against the backdrop of the roles of men and women in the society into which they are being reintegrated. Failing to do so may end in frustration and the failure to create equal opportunities for both.

The role of women in countering weapons and ammunition proliferation

In one way or another, civilians often live hand in hand with weapons and their effects, as victims and perpetrators of or silent witnesses to violence. Social and cultural patterns in conflict-affected areas—which are most often moulded by the same conflicts—often determine that men leave their families and communities to join state armed forces or irregular armed groups, gaining access to firearms at a very early age. Many have been uprooted from their homes and forced to join gangs. The use of arms and violence becomes a part of their identity and social understanding of masculinity.

Women, on the other hand, usually stay at home to take care of children and the elderly, often in extremely poor conditions and facing real security risks.[2] They walk long distances to find wood, water, and food, becoming vulnerable to assaults by armed groups in the process. MONUSCO reported 804 cases of sexual violence in the DRC in 2017, for example, affecting 507 women, 256 girls, 30 men, and 2 boys. Approximately 72 per cent of these attacks were attributed to non-state armed groups (UNSG, 2018, para. 37).

Following UN Security Council resolutions 1820 (2008) (UNSC, 2008), 1888 (2009) (UNSC, 2009a), and 1889 (2009) (UNSC, 2009b), Resolution 2106 (2013) (UNSC,

2013a) recognizes that sexual violence in armed conflict and post-conflict situations disproportionately affects women and girls and leads to serious trauma among forced witnesses of such violence targeting family members. It further recalls that such situations impede the critical contributions of women to society and, by extension, to durable peace and security (UNSC, 2013a, para. 1).

Women as agents of change. Given the opportunity, women have a huge role to play in actively countering conflict and rebuilding their societies. Women in conflict-affected areas are essential actors in creating an environment for social reconstruction and for disarmament as a key component of physical security, and in guiding their children—particularly boys—into an adulthood that is free of violence. Bearing arms in communities in conflict is usually linked to a perception of power and domination over those who are unarmed. As discussed, the role of men may be strongly defined by the use of weapons, to the extent that the prestige of group members may often be associated with the level of violence they inflict on behalf of the group. Having a gender perspective on weapons and ammunition management implies deconstructing this cultural pattern to build societies where men are dissociated from arms. WAM programmes, including DDR programmes, have proved to be effective in this regard by reducing the perception that the use of firearms guarantees security. The empowerment of civilians in these programmes can deprive weapons and ammunition of their symbolic and economic value. The latter is essential in contexts where literally everything is given a monetary 'value'—leading to exchanges of sex with armed actors for a bottle of water or food, for example—in order to satisfy basic human needs.

Developing early warning systems. A well-informed society is better prepared to develop and implement its own security strategies to counter the threat of weapons and ammunition proliferation. Policies and programmes aimed at eradicating illegal weapons and ammunition in conflict and post-conflict situations are more effective when civil society becomes involved. The development of early warning systems as instruments for conflict prevention and the protection of civilians can be an important step in the right direction, and female peacekeepers can be an integral part of these systems as the 'face' of a PSO. Such systems can offer valuable opportunities to gather and process information, leading to the avoidance of (an intensification of) local conflict. Peacekeepers on the ground can develop interactions with local populations by carrying out protection activities such as patrols, providing security, evacuating people under threat, or delivering humanitarian assistance. Community alert networks are examples of an effective UN early warning system to provide information about human rights violations or imminent threats. Every piece of information obtained from local villages is valuable when designing risk assessment tools or indicators to assess threats. Women within communities that peacekeepers are called on to protect are usually well informed because they stay in the villages with children and the elderly, who do not take part in the conflict.

TCC/PCC commitments to the WPS Agenda

The contribution of female peacekeepers to PSOs remains a major challenge for the UN and its member states. As of July 2018, just 4 per cent of deployed military personnel in UN missions are female (UNDPKO, n.d.a), and 11 per cent of police personnel (UNDPKO, n.d.b). To counter this, UNDPKO has identified increasing the participation of women in PSOs as a priority, and is in the process of implementing a compulsory requirement for TCCs to deploy a minimum of 15 per cent female personnel. TCCs have a significant role to play in achieving this, since the accomplishment of this goal is linked to the process of incorporating women into their respective armed forces.

Conclusion

The promotion of mechanisms for disarmament and countering weapons and ammunition proliferation is a key element of human security. Incorporating a gender perspective into WAM in peace operations contributes to the development of the human security concept by considering the differential impact of conflict and related peacekeeping activities on both males and females. In order to achieve this, contingents must be trained and prepared in military and policing activities, as well as cultural and gender awareness.

Female peacekeepers have an increasingly important role to play in PSOs, including as role models for local women in conflict-affected areas who wish to become involved in state security institutions, or to develop local capacities to prevent and eradicate the proliferation of weapons and ammunition. Irrespective of the percentage of female peacekeepers, however, it is essential for missions to be gender sensitive so that the needs of *all* members of the communities they are working with are recognized and supported.

Overall, gender mainstreaming in PSOs—including in WAM—should lead to the more effective implementation of a mission's mandate, particularly in relation to the protection of civilians. Ultimately, this is what helps to reduce the possibility of attacks against peacekeepers and the loss of COE.

Endnotes

1   Respectively, UNSC (2008; 2009a; 2009b; 2010; 2013a; 2013b; 2015).

2   Women and children also make up the majority of internally displaced persons globally.

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