

ANNEX V

MENTAL HEALTH STRATEGY
A Gender-responsive Approach to Uniformed
Personnel Mental Health



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Glossary

- Gender** Refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female, and the relationships between women and men and girls and boys. These attributes, opportunities, and relationships are socially constructed and learned through socialization. They are context and time-specific and changeable. Gender determines what is expected, allowed, and valued in a woman or a man in a given context. In most societies, there are differences and inequalities between women and men in responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, access to and control over resources, and decision-making opportunities. Gender is part of the broader socio-cultural context. Other essential criteria for socio-cultural analysis include class, race, poverty level, ethnic group, and age.
- Gender responsiveness** Refers to an approach that considers and responds to individuals' unique needs, experiences, and challenges based on their gender identities and roles. It recognizes that gender norms, functions, and expectations influence how individuals interact with and experience various aspects of society, including healthcare, education, criminal justice, and social services.
- SGBV trauma** Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) trauma encompasses a range of emotional, psychological, and physiological responses that can result from the experience of such violence. This trauma can include symptoms such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, dissociation, and other mental health challenges. Survivors of SGBV may experience a complex interplay of emotions, including fear, shame, guilt, anger, and grief.

1 Gender and mental health in United Nations peacekeeping environments

Introduction

Gender and mental health are closely linked within United Nations peacekeeping environments. These connections stem from the significant impact of gender-specific factors on the mental well-being of Uniformed Personnel deployed in United Nations missions. Personnel hold diverse roles, and often, traditional gender norms or expectations influence these. Gender dynamics within missions extend beyond mere numbers and encompass various aspects, including functions, responsibilities, and interactions within the Mission.

Women and men often assume distinct roles, with women frequently taking on the particular tasks of engaging with local communities and addressing gender-specific needs. Yet this gendered approach to different responsibilities can also perpetuate stereotypes that limit opportunities for both genders, to the detriment of the Mission's effectiveness. Consequently, men and women personnel frequently confront distinct challenges and responsibilities in the field. Furthermore, they may encounter situations involving sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), both as witnesses and responders, which can profoundly affect their mental health. Mental health stigma can be particularly pronounced in men-dominated environments such as the military, police and corrections, where gender-related stereotypes may discourage personnel from seeking help or discussing their mental health challenges openly.

Women in United Nations peacekeeping

The United Nations Secretary-General places paramount importance on advancing the active participation of women Uniformed Personnel in peacekeeping endeavours, aligning with the overarching Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy embraced across the UN system. This strategy, rooted in a sustainable increase in women's representation in United Nations peacekeeping operations, establishes ambitious targets. The Department of Peace Operations (DPO) Office of Military Affairs (OMA) aspires to achieve a 25% women composition by 2028, while the Police Department aims for a proportion of 35% women in seconded contracted professional positions at the United Nations Headquarters and 30% within field missions by 2028.¹ The Justice and Corrections Service has sought to increase gender representation to at least 30% by 2022. The DPO has achieved its 2022 targets for all types of personnel except military contingents, which represent the highest number of personnel and where progress has been more difficult given the low numbers of women in national armed forces in roles required for deployment. The Measuring Opportunities for Women in Peace Operations (MOWIP) report published by DCAF-Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance reveals that gender equality is central to long-term and sustainable peace and peace operations that are fit for the future.²

¹ *Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy 2018–28* (United Nations publication).

² DCAF, *Global MOWIP Report: Fit-for-the-Future Peace Operations: Advancing Gender Equality to Achieve Long-term and Sustainable Peace* (Geneva, 2022)

However, increasing women's representation alone will not achieve gender equality in peacekeeping. In addition, peacekeeping operations must provide enabling environments and inclusive organizational cultures to enable all peacekeepers to live up to their fullest potential.

Efforts are therefore also being made to build enabling environments for inclusivity, for example by improving working and living conditions and strengthening support and feedback mechanisms for deployed women, such as women's networks, as well as gender-responsive leadership training and guidance, such as through OMA's revised Guidelines on Integrating a Gender Perspective into the Work of the Military Component.

Within the realm of peace and security, the meaningful involvement of women directly impacts the sustainability of peace.³ Ultimately, a more inclusive workforce contributes to an organization that embodies its fundamental principles, imparts a transformative influence on the communities it serves, and reaps the proven benefits of efficiency and productivity derived from gender-diverse workforces.

Addressing the specific needs of women

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and resolutions underscore the paramount importance of addressing the distinct needs of women within conflict and peacekeeping contexts, encompassing considerations related to mental health. The United Nations' extensive policies and guidelines, including the United Nations Secretary-General's Bulletin on Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, emphasized safeguarding the well-being of Uniformed Personnel while carefully considering the multifaceted influence of gender-related factors.⁴

The United Nations has taken proactive steps by providing comprehensive training and awareness programmes to Uniformed Personnel. Training may cover topics such as stress management, resilience-building, and recognizing signs of mental health problems, as seen in the comprehensive World Health Organization's Mental Health Gap Action Programme (mhGAP) but also extended to the DPO, which has implemented peer support programmes in some missions. The Mental Health Strategy for Uniformed Personnel emphasizes resilience-building workshops, stigma reduction, advocacy, and family support. As this annex outlines, addressing gender-specific stressors and challenges impacting mental well-being is crucial. The initiatives must be designed to instil a deeper understanding of gender sensitivity and the far-reaching impact of gender dynamics, including on mental health.

Impact of neglecting gender-specific challenges

Addressing gender-specific mental health challenges is vital within United Nations peacekeeping missions. It is integral to mission effectiveness and overall success. Both men and women in challenging environments face unique experiences and vulnerabilities, requiring a specialized gender-sensitive mental health approach. Neglecting these risks

³ Radhika Coomaraswamy, *Global Study on implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000)* (New York, 2015).

⁴ ST/SGB/2003/13

perpetuates stereotypes and harms operational performance, exacerbating mental health issues.

Women, like men, face unique stressors in these roles. Overlooking or trivializing these challenges in counselling and support discourages help-seeking and can lead to unresolved mental health issues, impacting both individuals and mission objectives. Women's underrepresentation in leadership limits diverse perspectives, hindering innovation and adaptability. Neglecting gender-related tensions jeopardizes safety and can lead to incidents like harassment and assault.

Failing to consider women's and men's unique challenges during community engagement hinders mission effectiveness, impacting information gathering, conflict mediation, and collaboration. Unaddressed gender disparities and violence destabilize missions, undermining their goals and objectives. Recognizing and addressing these issues is essential for mission stability and effectiveness.

Embracing a gender-responsive approach, however, offers a potential beacon of hope. By doing so, peacekeeping missions can create a nurturing environment where all United Nations personnel, irrespective of gender, feel valued, heard, and empowered. Such an inclusive approach fosters individual well-being and serves as a cornerstone for operational excellence, ensuring a more successful, inclusive, and compelling future for peacekeeping missions.

2 Gender dynamics in peacekeeping environments

Historically, United Nations peacekeeping missions have been men-dominated, mirroring the gender imbalances in the broader security and uniformed service sectors. However, efforts are underway to boost women's participation, especially given their limited representation in leadership and combat roles. This lack of diversity constrains the array of perspectives and skills within the Mission.

In focus group discussions conducted in these missions, women participants reported being tasked with communication, community engagement, and addressing gender-specific issues, while men predominantly hold combat and security roles. Both genders encounter unique challenges: women grapple with discrimination, career advancement barriers, and safety concerns. Men, on the other hand, face the emotional weight of their roles. Prevailing gender norms, which associate masculinity with stoicism, might deepen these mental health challenges. Such norms may deter men from seeking assistance, fearing perceptions of weakness. For women, being in the minority can be an added deterrent to seeking support, as they might not want to appear vulnerable and thereby validate existing stereotypes.

3 Gender burdens in Uniformed Personnel

Both men and women navigate distinct challenges shaped by societal norms, expectations, and the intrinsic dynamics of working in deployment. For women, operating within men-dominated realms often means confronting overt and subtle forms of discrimination while also managing the expectations of their roles both in service and at home. Conversely, men

grapple with constraining stereotypes of masculinity, which can impede their emotional expression and deter them from seeking necessary support. These gender-specific burdens influence mental health, job performance, and interpersonal relations, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and addressing them in the context of uniformed services.

Being women Uniformed Personnel

Being a woman in peacekeeping sometimes presents additional challenges for women Uniformed Personnel. While their presence offers essential perspectives and enhances the effectiveness of missions, they may confront certain complexities that exert extra pressure.

- Representational burden: Women in uniform are frequently viewed as exemplars of gender equality in men-dominated settings. Consequently, there may be an expectation that they champion gender issues, potentially detracting from their primary roles and leading to an undue responsibility for representation.
- Gender-specific expectations: There might be assumptions that women Uniformed Personnel naturally perform gender-related tasks, like liaising with local women's groups or addressing gender-based violence. Though these tasks are vital, presupposing their automatic involvement can constrain their career trajectories and professional advancement.
- Emotional labour: Some expect women Uniformed Personnel to emotionally support local women and children impacted by conflict, owing to shared gender. This assumption emotionally affects them, necessitating emotional management and possibly extra training to handle such situations.
- Navigating gender norms: Women Uniformed Personnel can encounter challenges asserting their authority in settings where prevailing gender norms may limit their interactions with local men, potentially affecting their community engagement efficiency or burdening interactions within the Mission with men counterparts who are gender biased. They may also feel the pressure to behave in a more masculine way than may come naturally to them to assert this authority.
- Safety and security concerns: Being women might heighten the risk of gender-based violence, harassment, and exploitation, both internally and externally. Such safety concerns amplify their stress and vulnerability levels.
- Isolation and harassment: Due to their minority status, women Uniformed Personnel might feel isolated, leading to feelings of marginalization and being unsupported. Given peacekeeping operations' multicultural and multilingual environment, language barriers may further limit women's ability to build networks across Troops-/Police-Contributing Countries (T/PCCs). This may contribute to isolation when women are deployed in small numbers in their units. They may also be targets of gender-related harassment or discrimination, escalating their stress. Implementing strategies to counter such isolation and harassment is vital for their mental health.
- Pressure to prove competence: To counteract prevailing gender biases, women Uniformed Personnel might feel compelled to validate their capabilities continually. Such a relentless drive to surpass expectations can foster burnout.
- Work-life balance: Like their men peers, women Uniformed Personnel grapple with harmonizing demanding professional roles with personal obligations. Gender-specific expectations and heavy household constraints might exacerbate these balancing struggles, thereby intensifying their domestic responsibilities.

Being men Uniformed Personnel

In United Nations peacekeeping missions, while men might not face some of the gender-specific challenges that women encounter in men-dominated environments, they, too, grapple with pressures and expectations that can strain their mental well-being.

- Toxic masculinity expectations: Men might feel constrained by traditional notions of masculinity, discouraging them from expressing vulnerability or seeking emotional support. Suppressing emotions can trigger emotional distress and impede effective coping mechanisms.
- Physical and mental resilience: There is often an expectation for men to consistently showcase physical and mental resilience, especially in high-stress scenarios. Constantly trying to appear calm can lead to burnout and mental fatigue.
- Isolation and stoicism: The fear of seeming weak or vulnerable might deter men from discussing their mental health issues, isolating them from potential support. Such stoicism can exacerbate mental health problems by preventing early intervention.
- Lack of peer support: The traditional masculine culture within uniformed services can discourage open dialogues about feelings and mental well-being. This environment can deter men from sharing their challenges or seeking advice.
- Role expectations: Men, especially those in combat-centric roles, might feel the need to validate their masculinity and competence continually. This persistent pressure can contribute to stress, overextension, and performance anxiety.
- Stress of leadership roles: Men in leadership capacities may bear the brunt of stress from decision-making that directly affects the safety and well-being of their teams. This responsibility can induce anxiety and other mental health complications.
- Reintegration challenges: Male personnel might find reintegrating into civilian life post-deployment challenging like their female counterparts. Navigating traditional roles as a provider, partner, and parent while processing mission experiences can be taxing.
- Exposure to trauma: It is not uncommon for men/women Uniformed Personnel to witness or endure traumatic events during deployment. The ingrained expectation to stay composed can result in unprocessed trauma, potentially leading to PTSD, anxiety, or depression.

Creating an environment that acknowledges and addresses these challenges can help women and men Uniformed Personnel fully utilize their skills and contribute to missions without additional pressures.

4 A gender-responsive approach to mental health in peacekeeping

Foundational insights

The mental health survey results and insights from focus group discussions have elucidated critical dimensions for creating a robust gender-responsive mental health strategy for United Nations peacekeeping personnel. Key foundational elements for this strategy include:

- Infrastructure considerations: The survey underscored the vital role of infrastructure in positively influencing mental health.
- Addressing gender sensitivities: Embedding gender sensitivities within the strategy is imperative.
- Gender-related mental health and well-being: Even though the survey data didn't show distinct gender-based variations in responses, it is essential to evaluate gender differences in mental health experiences and tailor interventions accordingly.
- Sensitizing leadership: Peacekeeping mission leaders must be attuned to gender-specific mental health nuances. This calls for training that equips leaders to comprehend and address the distinct mental health challenges various genders confront.
- Barriers to help-seeking: The strategy will actively combat the potential influence of gender norms on seeking help.
- Parity in deployment: Achieving gender balance among deployed Uniformed Personnel can bolster the mental health of all involved.

Actionable strategies

A gender-aware approach to mental health calls for strategies that recognize and cater to the distinct needs and challenges across genders:

- Customized support: Understand that gender roles and societal expectations can influence how men and women experience mental health challenges. Offer support tailored to these distinct needs without reinforcing stereotypes.
- Awareness and education: Roll out gender-aware mental health education initiatives to dismantle detrimental gender norms and mitigate stigma. Such programmes can foster understanding, cultivate empathy, and stimulate candid discussions about mental well-being.
- Diverse representation: Emphasize diversity among mental health support staff, ensuring professionals are equipped to understand and relate to a broad spectrum of gender experiences.
- Inclusive services: Establish safe, gender-inclusive spaces that foster comfort in seeking assistance. Design therapeutic services that resonate with varying gender experiences.
- Data collection and research: Gather gender-specific data on mental health trends to guide evidence-backed interventions. Prioritize research that zeroes in on gender-centric mental health disparities.

- Advocacy and policy: Advocate for policy shifts emphasizing gender-inclusive mental healthcare. Promote gender equality as a foundational element of all mental health endeavours.

5 Success stories

The comprehensive findings from surveys and focus group discussions highlight the effectiveness of tailored strategies in enhancing the mental well-being of Uniformed Personnel in United Nations peacekeeping missions. Specialized training, open discussions, and targeted interventions have paved the way to successfully address the unique mental health challenges women and men face in diverse roles.

Furthermore, integrating gender-responsive mental health strategies has bolstered the mental resilience of United Nations Uniformed Personnel. This has contributed to a more cohesive and inclusive mission environment. The following case studies shed light on the transformative power of prioritizing gender-responsive mental health support in improving the overall effectiveness and well-being of peacekeeping operations.

Scenario 1: Group Leader F, a dedicated United Nations peacekeeper, embarked on a challenging deployment Mission in a conflict zone. As a woman in a predominantly men-dominated environment, she navigated unique dynamics that influenced her mental health experiences. Throughout her deployment, she perceived differences in her interactions with colleagues due to gender. She often needed to prove herself in ways that her men counterparts might not have experienced. This added layer of pressure taxed her emotional well-being. Despite the demanding circumstances of her Mission, she initially downplayed the importance of her mental health. However, the compounded effects of these challenges began to take their toll: increasing isolation, sleep disturbances, and heightened anxiety. Seeking support within her Mission felt more complex because of the prevailing gender dynamics. Group Leader F learned of her elevated stress levels following a mental health screening. This discovery prompted her to seek help, and she engaged in counselling sessions with the unit's psychologist. Here, she delved into the interplay of gender and mental well-being, finding coping strategies tailored to her challenges.

Scenario 2: Group Leader M, a committed United Nations peacekeeper, was four months into his Mission. A father to two young children, with a third on the way, was navigating his first deployment. His Mission was set in a demanding, conflict-laden region, and he faced various traumatic situations. He grappled with societal expectations of masculinity, constantly needing to project an image of unwavering strength and stoicism. This external pressure strained his emotional well-being, especially as he tried to balance these expectations with the challenges of his Mission. Initially, he viewed seeking help for mental concerns as a potential sign of weakness. Yet, as the challenges mounted, he became increasingly isolated, haunted by intrusive thoughts and emotional unrest. Traditional notions of masculinity made the idea of seeking support even more daunting. However, after a mental health screening revealed elevated stress levels, he sought assistance. Engaging in counselling sessions with the unit's psychologist—a woman—he developed coping strategies tailored to his experiences.

Both scenarios emphasize the intricate relationship between gender, societal expectations, and mental health in deployment settings. They underscore the importance of recognizing

and addressing these relationships to create an environment where all personnel, irrespective of gender, can thrive mentally and emotionally.

6 Recommendations

By addressing and implementing the following list of recommendations in the Mental Health Strategy for Uniformed Personnel, United Nations peacekeeping missions can establish effective gender-responsive mental health support systems that enhance and sustain the well-being of all United Nations Uniformed Personnel:

- **Infrastructure & mental health:** A pivotal revelation from our survey is the profound influence of infrastructure on mental health. For Uniformed Personnel, secure accommodation, well-situated facilities such as toilets and showers, and overall conducive living conditions are paramount to their well-being, regardless of gender. While work has been undertaken to provide gender-responsive camp designs and gender-responsive facilities and infrastructure, this work must continue to be prioritized.
- **Incorporating gender responsiveness:** A comprehensive mental health strategy must integrate gender responsiveness. By understanding the potential gender variations in mental health, interventions can be designed to reduce disparities, promoting mental health equity.
- **Preventive focus:** A proactive approach means addressing gender-specific risk factors. This encompasses efforts to combat sexual harassment and address women's challenges in men-dominated roles.

Specialized initiatives

- **Combat stress management programmes:** These programmes are tailored to manage combat-related stress, equipping personnel with coping and resilience-building strategies.
- **Peer support networks:** Fostering environments that promote open dialogues about mental health, providing safe platforms for experience-sharing.
- **Leadership sensitization:** Training initiatives that ensure leadership within peacekeeping missions understand and cater to gender-specific mental health challenges.
- **Destigmatizing help-seeking:** Despite societal norms potentially affecting help-seeking behaviours, our strategy aims to counteract this. Campaigns that challenge stigmas and promote the notion that seeking help is strength-centric are pivotal.
- **Deployment dynamics & mental health:** Pursuing gender parity in deployed personnel can significantly improve collective mental health. A balanced deployment model can cultivate a supportive environment, addressing challenges stemming from gender imbalances.

Training and awareness

- **Gender-responsive training:** This focuses on the nexus of gender and mental health, enlightening personnel on gender-specific challenges.

- Trauma-informed approaches: These are tailored to cater to unique traumas experienced across genders, including combat trauma, discrimination, and gender-based violence.
- Support for survivors: Comprehensive mechanisms to aid survivors of SGBV are essential, integrating mental health within broader support frameworks.
- Cultural sensitivity in mental health: Understanding and addressing cultural nuances in mental health perceptions is imperative, ensuring interventions are region- and community-specific.

7 Conclusion and road ahead

Understanding gender reveals the intricate, politically charged contexts where mental health issues arise in uniformed service. Delving into gender and mental health within United Nations peacekeeping operations uncovers complex dynamics and significant challenges. These insights emphasize the influence of gender norms on mental health, unveiling disparities that need targeted interventions. Recognizing gender-specific mental health issues underscores the importance of adopting gender-responsive strategies. Such strategies, encompassing tailored support, awareness efforts, policy modifications, and collaboration, can cultivate inclusivity and well-being. The success of peacekeeping missions is closely tied to the well-being of Uniformed Personnel, underscoring the necessity of gender-sensitive mental health support.

The collective responsibility of the United Nations and its Member States is to ensure decisive action. This involves prioritizing and channelling resources into gender-sensitive mental health frameworks, which are pivotal for the health, performance, and overall effectiveness of Uniformed Personnel.

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