From Female Engagement Teams to Engagement Platoons: The Evolution of Gendered Community Engagement in UN Peace Operations
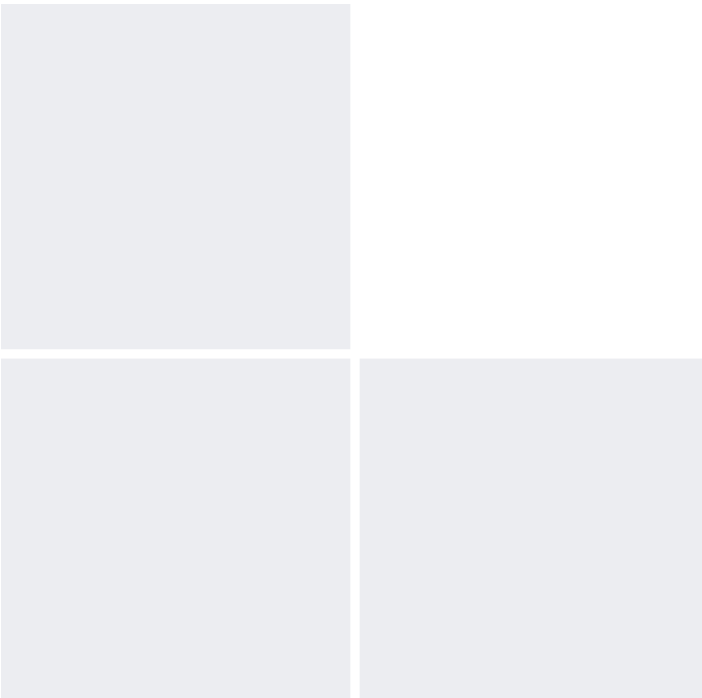
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ABBREVIATIONS

CIMIC	Civil-military coordination
CRSV	Conflict-related sexual violence
DDR	Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration
DPO	UN Department of Peace Operations
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
EP	Engagement platoon
ET	Engagement team
FET	Female engagement team
MET	Mixed engagement team
MINUSCA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic
MINUSMA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MONUSCO	UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
OMA	UN Department of Peace Operations Office of Military Affairs
TCC	Troop-contributing country
UNIBAM	UN Infantry Battalion Manual
UNFICYP	UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus
UNIFIL	UN Interim Force in Lebanon
UNMISS	UN Mission in South Sudan

Executive Summary

The military components of UN peacekeeping operations have used engagement teams (ETs) to conduct community engagement activities since at least 2015. Initially, ETs were ad hoc initiatives taken by missions and troop-contributing countries to increase community engagement through women peacekeepers. More recently, the UN has begun to institutionalize gendered community engagement, including through an ongoing shift from ETs to engagement platoons (EPs).

This growing attention to ETs reflects a general recognition of their benefits, both among peacekeepers who have patrolled with ETs and at UN headquarters. One of the main benefits of ETs is that they improve missions' information-gathering efforts; by ensuring that these efforts include women in host communities, ETs can help missions better analyze and respond to threats as well as develop a more nuanced understanding of community perspectives. ETs can also build trust and relationships between the peacekeeping force and community members, improve responses to conflict-related sexual violence, and provide ad hoc development or humanitarian assistance.

Yet in carrying out these roles, ETs have faced several operational challenges. First, training for ETs has been limited, and the rollout of a new training package has been delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, implementation of ETs has often been dependent on the buy-in of individual mission leaders. Third, the short duration of deployments and lack of proper handovers make it difficult for ETs to retain contextual knowledge and community relationships. Fourth, ETs are not always well-integrated within missions, nor are ET members always involved in policymaking at UN headquarters. Finally, data collection, documentation of best practices, and reporting on gendered community engagement activities are extremely limited.

In addition to these operational challenges, gendered assumptions and stereotypes can negatively impact the work of ETs and EPs. Women deployed to these teams face two overarching assumptions: (1) that women peacekeepers are more effective at conducting community engagement than their male counterparts, which can place a burden on them to succeed by merit of their gender identity rather than their professional ability; and (2) that women peacekeepers require protection from military men when on patrol, which can limit the roles they are assigned and perpetuate gendered stereotypes. Moreover, the work of ETs is often grounded in gendered—and racialized—assumptions and stereotypes about host communities. Broader assumptions around gender, including the tendency to equate "gender" with "women," can also impact the training and activities of ETs.

To effectively implement ETs and EPs, leaders in missions and in national militaries must address the institutional barriers that not only preclude women's full participation in peace operations but also perpetuate these gendered stereotypes. Toward this end, troop-contributing countries and the UN should:

- Provide training on the skills required for community engagement to men and women across all levels of the military;

- Shift the burden for gendered community engagement off of women;

- Improve internal reporting and analysis by ETs and EPs;

- Coordinate between ETs and EPs and other mission components;

- Build the capacity of missions to engage with communities; and

- Avoid reinforcing gendered assumptions and stereotypes through the activities of ETs and EPs.

Introduction

The military components of United Nations peacekeeping operations have used engagement teams (ETs) to conduct community engagement activities since at least 2015. ETs allow military peacekeepers to better connect with host-state populations and assess their gendered needs. More generally, they can improve missions' situational awareness, contributing to the implementation of mandated priorities like the protection of civilians and improving the safety and security of peacekeepers. Peacekeepers who have patrolled as members of ETs are generally positive about their experiences with and the effectiveness of ETs. Likewise, the sentiment at UN headquarters is that ETs have been an important addition to peacekeeping operations.

Yet despite a general recognition of their benefits, ETs have not been consistently understood or defined, making it difficult to assess how they have been used and to what effect. ETs have taken many names and forms. While they are commonly referred to as female engagement teams (FETs) or mixed engagement teams (METs), these terms are not used consistently.[1] The structure of ETs is also inconsistent. Personnel patrolling with ETs typically have another job, and the amount of time they spend assigned to an ET is dependent on numerous, varied factors. While some troop-contributing countries (TCCs) have established processes for assembling and training ETs before deployment, many teams are formed on an ad hoc basis, sometimes at the mission level after troops have already been trained and deployed.

This inconsistency reflects the lack of an official UN policy on ETs. Recently, however, the UN has been working to provide missions with more guidance, including in the UN Infantry Battalion Manual (UNIBAM) published by the UN Department of Peace Operations' Office of Military Affairs (OMA) in 2020. The UNIBAM introduces engagement platoons (EPs), which encompass several engage-ment teams each, as a new military capability (see Figure 5). It also clarifies these platoons' goals and makeup, requiring them to have "a minimum of 50 per cent women personnel."[2] In addition, the UNIBAM emphasizes that engagement with the host-state population is the responsibility of the entire battalion, with the EP providing support and expertise. In 2021, OMA will release an Engagement Platoons Handbook and training package detailing the activities and operational goals of EPs. Several TCCs have already begun generating and deploying EPs.

While OMA has made the decision to move forward with EPs, there has been little to no coordi-nated effort to consolidate information on the prior use of ETs. Reporting on the activities of ETs has been inconsistent and mission-dependent, and lessons from the little reporting there has been have yet to be institutionalized. This means that decisions on the configuration of ETs and the shift to EPs have largely been based on the individual preferences of UN personnel who occupy certain posts rather than the on-the-ground experiences of the ETs themselves.

> There is little information on the past or current use of engagement teams in UN peace operations.

This paper aims to help decision makers align policies and guidance with evidence of what has and has not worked. It presents data on the prior activities of ETs and the experiences of those deployed to ETs to establish a baseline against which EPs can be measured over time.

This paper is informed by desk research, a closed-door workshop held on January 24, 2020, and thirty-eight interviews conducted by the author between August 2019 and March 2021. Additional interviews with three military contingents and mission sections were conducted on behalf of the author by MONUSCO staff during four site visits between October 2020 and February 2021. Interviewees included military and civilian personnel at UN headquarters and in missions; current and former force gender advisers from five missions; military personnel (both men and

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1   In this paper, the term engagement teams (ETs) is used when referring to FETs and METs in UN peace operations. The gender composition of these teams is indicated by referring to them as "all-women" or "mixed-gender" ETs.

2   UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO), "United Nations Infantry Battalion Manual (UNIBAM): Second Edition," January 2020, p. 67.

women) who had experience with FETs in the Australian, British, and US military deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq; and military peacekeepers (both men and women) who have patrolled as part of engagement teams during UN deployments.[3] Additionally, military peacekeepers from six missions completed questionnaires about their activities with and perceptions of ETs.[4]

Box 1. Definitions and goals of community engagement in guidance for military components

UN Infantry Battalion Manual (UNIBAM): The manual defines engagement as "the interaction of the UN [infantry battalion] with representatives of the population and other government and non-government actors within the [area of operations] to improve cooperation, and reporting." It sets out several goals of engagement:

- "Deconflict military activities with those of other actors in the [area of operations], ensure the military does not negatively impact the local population and other actors, and that military operations are not affected by the activities of others";
- "Improve force protection through better situational awareness and ensure that violations of UN policy or international law are recognized and reported";
- "Help improve the relationship between the Force and the local community" through "engagement with the host government, parties to the conflict and other armed groups";
- "Deter and prevent Conflict Related Sexual Violence (CRSV) and other Human Rights abuses and conduct advocacy of peaceful processes, inclusion of women in dialogue and conforming to International humanitarian Law"; and
- "Identify the unique needs and risks of men, women, boys and girls" and "identify 'hot spots' that can be targeted by increased military presence to prevent escalations of violence."[5]

Engagement Platoons Handbook: The handbook cites the same definition as UNIBAM and adds several additional goals of engagement:

- Increase access, including both "physical accessibility of meetings and engagements, and access to information so that involvement is well informed";
- Provide opportunities "for people to make informed input to a plan, policy, or proposal" and for decision makers "to account for the reasons for their policies and proposed actions"; and
- Enhance "the mutual understanding of 'ownership' for all parties" and increase "the chance of better outcomes being reached through more collaborative processes that build a communities' [sic] capacity and sustainability."[6]

MONUSCO Practice Note: The note defines engagement as "a core military responsibility" that "focuses on interaction with representatives of the local population, government and non-governmental actors to improve their understanding of UN peacekeeping; their buy-in and cooperation in protection of civilians and other peacekeeping initiatives; and to allow for enhanced service delivery and reporting by integrating the voices, needs and concerns of women, men, girls and boys in local communities."[7]

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3 All interviews were conducted virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced the indefinite postponement of planned in-person visits to MINUSCA, MINUSMA, and MONUSCO.

4 The first questionnaire was distributed to MINUSCA, MINUSMA, MONUSCO, and UNMISS and yielded 192 responses; the second questionnaire was distributed to UNFICYP and UNITAMS and yielded 41 responses. Questionnaires were distributed both in English and in French. A pilot questionnaire was also distributed to MINUSMA and yielded 29 responses. While the responses from the latter two questionnaires are not quantified as part of the data presented later in this paper, the responses to open-ended questions have been taken into account when analyzing peacekeepers' perspectives on their roles as members of engagement teams.

5 UN DPO, "UNIBAM: Second Edition," p. 17.

6 UN DPO, "Engagement Platoons Handbook [draft]," p. 2.

7 UN DPO, "Practice Note on MONUSCO Engagement Teams," January 1, 2021, p. 5.

The Origins and Evolution of UN Engagement Teams and Platoons

There is little information on the past or current use of ETs in UN peacekeeping operations. The history of the concept, from ad hoc all-women teams formed in-mission to engagement platoons mandated by UN headquarters, has not been linear or clear-cut. Moreover, given the temporary nature of many UN positions and the lengthy process of developing guidance, the recent shift from ETs to EPs has involved a changing group of people with different ideas of which approach would work best and different justifications for this shift.[8] Many of these people also lack the necessary background or expertise—a perennial problem for gender-related work.

Another challenge to assessing the history of ETs is the inconsistency and contested nature of terminology (see Table 1). The framing, use, and composition of ETs has varied depending on each TCC's understanding of the concept, biases, and willingness to deploy women. As such, "FET" has tended to mean something different to everybody. To one person, it might mean thirty women patrolling on their own. To another, it might mean a mixed patrol with both women and men. Historically, it has been disputed whether FETs are comprised only of women peacekeepers or whether the "F" simply indicates that the team's primary responsibility is to engage with women in host communities.[9]

This section seeks to provide clarity on the history of ETs in UN peacekeeping operations. It begins with the origins of ETs in US and coalition military forces in Afghanistan, which served as a model for ETs in the UN. It then provides an overview of the conceptual, policy, and operational evolution of ETs in UN peacekeeping operations.

Table 1. UN military units focused on community engagement

Unit Name	Definition	Policy Guidance	UN Timeline
Female engagement team (FET)	Can refer to either an all-women team of military personnel or a mixed-gender team that explicitly engages with women in the host community	• MONUSCO Practice Note • No UN-wide guidance • No consistent training by TCCs or missions	Used ad hoc since at least 2015
Mixed engagement team (MET)	A mixed-gender team that engages with the entire community	• No UN-wide guidance • No consistent training by TCCs or missions	Used ad hoc, start date unknown
Engagement platoon (EP)	A mixed-gender platoon comprised of a minimum of 50 percent women that engages with the entire community	• January 2020 UN Infantry Battalion Manual (UNIBAM) • Engagement Platoon Handbook and training package (forthcoming)	Used ad hoc prior to the publication of UNIBAM

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8   These processes are extremely drawn-out due to heavy member-state involvement, politics, lack of resources, and lack of expertise, among other issues.

9   Interview with member-state expert, January 2020. At the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), for example, a Kenyan combat platoon with thirty-six women was tasked with community engagement as part of efforts to protect women collecting firewood around the mission's protection of civilians (POC) sites. As one UNMISS official said, "We can say this is a female engagement team, but we can also say it is mixed because they were accompanied by male platoons who helped to 'picket' the firewood-gathering spaces." Interview with official deployed to UNMISS, October 2020.

FETs in Afghanistan: An Early Model for the UN

The UN has only used engagement teams since around 2015, but the concept goes back to the US-led military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 (see Figure 1 for a timeline). In Afghanistan, FETs were all-women teams focused on engaging with women. Interviewees frequently cited the Afghanistan example when explaining how they first heard about FETs. They also frequently referred to the US FETs as a model for ETs in UN peacekeeping operations, even if the US FETs served a different purpose in the context of counterterrorism operations. Overall, interviewees considered the US FETs to be a positive example. As the UN institutionalizes EPs, there are lessons it could learn from this US model.

While FETs were first used by the US military and coalition forces during their occupation of Afghanistan, most histories of the concept recognize the US military's Lioness program in Iraq as paving the way for gendered community engagement. The Lioness program was primarily an ad hoc method for conducting "culturally sensitive" searches of women's bodies to deter enemy forces from using women to "conduct terrorist operations and smuggling operations."[10] The FETs in Afghanistan, by contrast, evolved to focus on intelligence gathering. The US Marine Corps coined the term FET in 2009, and the US approach to FETs has since had a number of iterations, including cultural support teams that accompanied special operations forces to gain access not only to women but also to children as sources of intelligence (a no-go in UN peacekeeping).[11] The US military disbanded the Marines' FETs and cultural support teams in 2012, only to temporarily revive them in 2015.[12]

Accounts of FETs in Afghanistan point to both benefits and challenges. These teams helped advance the understanding that the entire population—not just men—can be seen as a resource for military operations. With this comes a baseline acknowledgement that women are members of their communities who have agency, can serve as sources of information, and are often political actors. Additionally, the use of FETs in Afghanistan helped disrupt assumptions held in the US military about Afghan culture, such as the stereotype that Afghan women do not have any social influence.[13] However, the FETs were also grounded in the assumption that Afghan women would want to cooperate with foreign women in uniform by merit of a shared gender identity. This is a dangerous assumption, as the primary goal of most of these FETs seems to have been to gather intelligence to advance the goals of the controversial occupying coalition, many of whose members were associated directly or indirectly with war crimes.[14]

There were also challenges in configuring the FETs. Three interviewees cited a failed attempt by coalition forces at using all-women teams in Afghanistan where the women were told to patrol without their weapons and were given pink backpacks to signal a sort of harmlessness.[15] These teams reportedly returned with "zero usable information."[16] Another interviewee, discussing her experiences while deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan with the US Army, noted that many women were "voluntold" to be part of FETs because commanders were told they needed to check a "gender box."[17]

Another interviewee gave a more successful example of a FET in Afghanistan that would go out on patrol "not just once but many times, going at

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10 Raymond Kareko, "Female Engagement Teams," Army University Press, October 25, 2019; interview with women in the US military, December 2020 and February 2021.

11 Kareko, "Female Engagement Teams."

12 Hope Hodge Seck, "Marine Corps Revives Female Engagement Team Mission," *Marine Times*, August 5, 2015.

13 Ginger E. Beals, "Women Marines in Counterinsurgency Operations: Lioness and Female Engagement Teams" (master's thesis, Marine Corps University, 2010); Thomas E. Ricks, "Women in COIN (II): How to Do It Right," *Foreign Policy*, October 9, 2009.

14 See: Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force, "Afghanistan Inquiry Report" ("Brereton Report"), November 10, 2020; and International Criminal Court, "Afghanistan: ICC Appeals Chamber Authorises the Opening of an Investigation," March 5, 2020.

15 Interview with woman in the Australian military, November 2020; interview with woman in the UK military, December 2020; interview with woman in the US military, January 2021.

16 Interview with woman in the Australian military, November 2020.

17 Interview with woman in the US military, February 2021.

different times of day for visibility." Eventually, this team observed that there was one time during the week when women routinely could not be found. When they asked why this happened, they were told that "Wednesday afternoons are when the Taliban deliver the guns cache."[18] By paying attention to the whole of the civilian population rather than just one subset, the occupying soldiers garnered actionable intelligence relevant to their operational needs.

To maximize their effectiveness, however, studies have shown that the US military would need to employ FETs across the entire infantry rather than only to certain sections. Relatedly, the effectiveness of FETs has been difficult to monitor "because they were often employed on an as-needed basis, and they did not have standardized systems or programs in place to ensure proper data collection."[19] The mandate for FETs was also vague, and "no tools were developed to monitor [their] success or failure."[20] The UN faces similar limitations in its use of engagement teams.

Figure 1. Timeline of engagement teams

Figure 1. Timeline of engagement teams

2005
Lioness teams trained by US Army and Marines in Iraq

2008
"Female engagement team (FET)" coined by US Marines

2015
First FET created in MONUSCO

2016
First FET created in MINUSCA

2019
UN EP Working Group started

2020
UNIBAM published with EP guidance

2021
MONUSCO Practice Note circulated

2021
EP Reinforcement Training Package piloted in Rwanda

2021
EP Handbook published (*forthcoming*)

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18 Interview with woman in the Australian military, November 2020.
19 Kareko, "Female Engagement Teams."
20 Gary Owen, "'Reach the Women': The US Military's Experiment of Female Soldiers Working with Afghan Women," Afghan Analysts Network, June 20, 2015.

The Initial Push for Engagement Teams at the UN

The exact origins of ETs in UN peacekeeping operations are not entirely clear. Even several senior-level policymakers at UN headquarters said that "no one really knows when FETs started being used," and there are no comprehensive records or lists of TCCs that have deployed them.[21] Interviewees and questionnaire respondents indicated that all-women ETs, as well as mixed-gender patrols, had been used in some UN missions since 2015. The UN missions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) and the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) were among the first to use ETs. They have since been introduced to the missions in South Sudan (UNMISS), Mali (MINUSMA), Cyprus (UNFICYP), Lebanon (UNIFIL), and Abyei (UNISFA) as well as in the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

Initially, these were ad hoc initiatives by missions and TCCs as units and force commanders recognized the need for increased community engagement through women peacekeepers. In many cases, they were pushed by military women themselves. The Zambian battalion's piloting of FETs in MINUSCA in 2016 is an example of this ad hoc approach. One woman deployed to the battalion related how she received training on tactical skills from the US Army and that these trainers spoke about the use of FETs in Iraq and Afghanistan to encourage the Zambian women. Once deployed to the mission, she did her own research on these programs and thought, "Maybe we can start from there." She subsequently helped create MINUSCA's first FET, which was comprised of an engineer, a gender adviser, a nurse

> Even as peacekeepers sought to engage more with communities, they tended to interact primarily with men.

midwife, and a logistics officer.[22]

While the value of community engagement is undisputed, the justifications for deploying engagement teams have varied widely. However, two main reasons have been commonly cited: (1) to increase the ability of infantry battalions to engage with all members of host communities; and (2) to increase the number of women involved in military operations.[23]

Over the past decade, the UN system has come to recognize that "peacekeeping operations need to improve their engagement with the communities they serve."[24] Community engagement began as a way for peace operations both to gather information useful for situational awareness and to build trust between peacekeepers and the host community.[25] With an increase in the number of missions with protection of civilians (POC) mandates and the rise in peacekeeper fatalities in recent years, community engagement activities have also become central to protection activities and to the safety and security of peacekeepers themselves (see Box 1 on definitions and goals of community engagement for missions' military components).[26]

Yet even as peacekeepers sought to engage more with communities, they tended to interact primarily with men. One peacekeeper formerly deployed to MONUSCO said that she was in the mission for six months without hearing about a peacekeeper ever speaking to a Congolese woman while on patrol. Many of her colleagues, as she saw it, expected male administrators to speak for the entire community, and this premise was accepted by UN military leadership.[27] Other interviewees

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21 Interviews with former and current officials at OMA, 2019–2021.

22 Interview with woman military peacekeeper deployed to MINUSCA, July 2020.

23 IPI research workshop, New York, January 24, 2020; interview with former gender adviser, December 2019.

24 Harley Henigson, "Community Engagement in UN Peacekeeping Operations: A People-Centered Approach to Protecting Civilians," International Peace Institute, November 2020, p. 2.

25 Ibid.; IPI research workshop.

26 UN Security Council and General Assembly, *Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations* [HIPPO], UN Doc. A/70/95–S/2015/446, June 17, 2015; Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz, William R. Phillips, and Salvator Cusimano, "Improving Security of United Nations Peacekeepers: We Need to Change the Way We are Doing Business" ("Cruz Report"), December 19, 2017; Henigson, "Community Engagement." The UNIBAM also reflects this shift.

27 Interview with woman peacekeeper deployed to MONUSCO, December 2020.

pointed out that some male peacekeepers are reluctant to engage with women in host communities in part due to their concerns over being accused of sexual exploitation and abuse.[28] This concern is worrying and points to the complicated realities facing more comprehensive gender-sensitive community engagement by peacekeepers as well as a poor understanding and handling of incidents of sexual exploitation and abuse across the UN. The perception that women in host communities are more likely to speak with uniformed women reflects this, though very few peacekeepers surveyed expressed that they thought uniformed women and men should only engage with women and men in the host community, respectively (see Figure 2).

These shortcomings drove a push not only for stronger guidance on community engagement but also for ETs. Those who advocated for ETs argued that more than half of the population was being ignored by the existing approach to community engagement. This amounted to a fundamental violation of women's rights and made

peacebuilding less effective in the long term.[29] Advocates saw ETs as part of the solution, and both interviewees and questionnaire respondents consistently said they saw ETs as a mechanism to increase the operational effectiveness of peacekeeping missions.

Advocates of ETs also increasingly viewed them as a way to increase the number of military women deployed as peacekeepers. Indeed, this focus on increasing the number of military women began to overtake discussions around community engagement. By 2018 and 2019, the UN had become increasingly worried about the low number of military women, even at headquarters. All over, "numbers were too low: military observers, staff officers, and in contingents."[30] Some saw the use of a "pure female element" such as all-women ETs or the all-women formed police units used in Liberia and Haiti as an answer to the numbers problem.[31] Others have pointed out that, because the number of women included in ETs is relatively low compared to overall military deployments, ETs are not an effective way to achieve gender parity.

Figure 2. Belief that peacekeepers should only engage with community members of the same gender
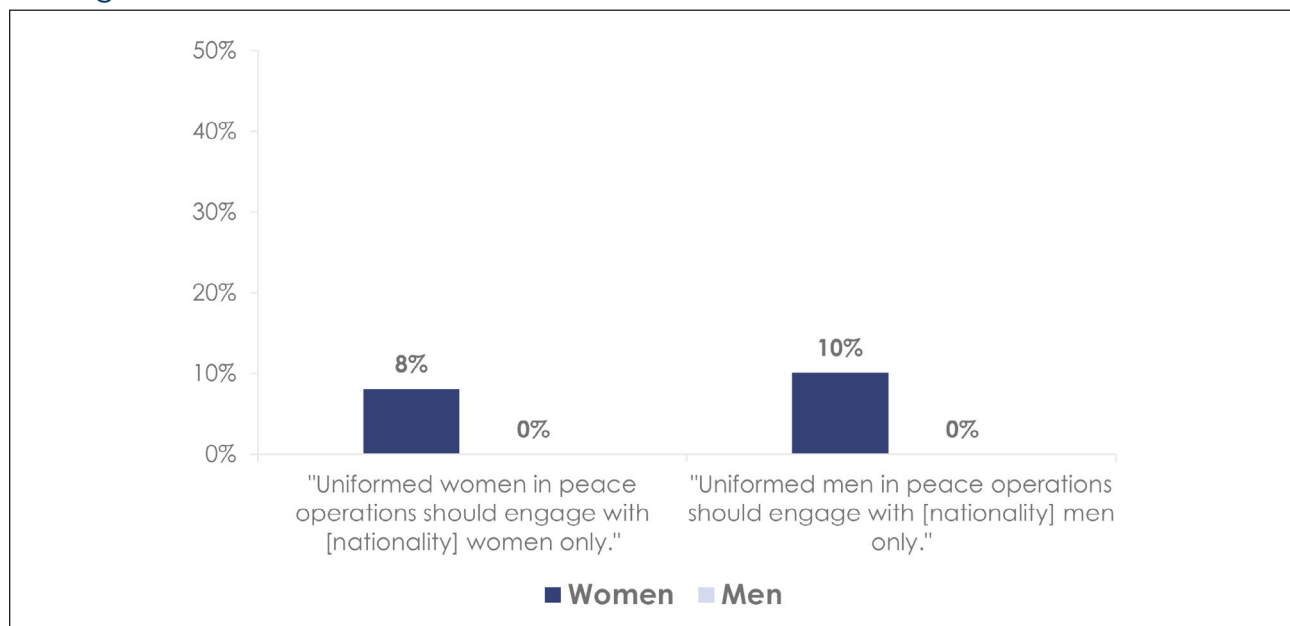
28 This concern is expanded on further in the report. Interviews with officials at UN headquarters, December 2019 and January 2020.

29 Interviews with former OMA officials, August 2019, November 2019, January 2020, November 2020, December 2020, and January 2021.

30 Interviews with OMA officials, November 2019, December 2020, and January 2021.

31 Interview with senior military official at UN headquarters, February 2021.

Nevertheless, they are frequently used as public-facing, positive examples of women's participation, and some headquarters officials cited them as a means to meet the targets set out in the UN Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy 2018–2028.

These two justifications for ETs—improving community engagement and increasing the number of military women—intersected with each other. This was demonstrated by a 2016 OMA study comprising sixty-two interviews with military advisers. The questions—why might women not deploy, what are the challenges they face, and what might make it easier to deploy women?—were initially conceived of to learn how to increase the number of women deployed. However, the respondents consistently said they believed that having more military women would increase community engagement in peace operations.[32] In some missions, ETs were also considered a way to better utilize women peacekeepers who were sometimes relegated to administrative roles—often in spite of their infantry training—instead of being sent on patrols.[33]

The push for ETs coincided with the UN's increased attention to peacekeeping-intelligence. The 2019 policy on peacekeeping-intelligence "fulfills a dire and long-overlooked need to link enhanced situational awareness to timely decisions and actions to ensure the safety and security of personnel and the protection of civilians."[34] One senior military officer connected the UN's intelligence efforts to the creation of engagement platoons, saying, "We decided that [engagement platoons] could be a really good instrument for acquisition of intelligence."[35] At the same time, this potential link was a concern for some who had doubts about the role of EPs, and of peacekeeping operations more broadly, in intelligence generation.[36]

A Shifting Approach to Engagement Teams

After originating in the field, staff at OMA began discussions on formalizing the use of ETs in peace operations in 2016. From the start, it was unclear what approach the UN would take to ETs. The original suggestion within OMA was for missions to adopt a mixed-gender approach: OMA could ask TCCs that already deployed a relatively high number of women to ensure they always included at least two women in every patrol in a populated area. An alternative suggestion was that missions could use all-women teams of peacekeepers to speak to local women.[37]

The all-women model has predominated over the last few years. For example, MONUSCO has used Tanzanian women peacekeepers to speak to Congolese women in host communities.[38] The idea behind this approach was that only member states that did not already have women on patrol needed to assemble FETs to increase the presence of military women in community engagement. In one iteration of the policy in 2018, FETs were conceived of as teams of around thirty women which would be stand-alone units within infantry battalions, the idea being that a contained unit would be easier to administer.[39] Upon deployment, these thirty-women teams could be broken into smaller two- to four-person teams that would accompany primarily male patrols. Later in 2018, OMA assembled an Engagement Platoons Working Group made up of twenty-two member states, which is still in existence. Its membership has given input into the process of finalizing the structure of EPs, developing the UN's first Engagement Platoon Reinforcement Training Package (which was piloted in Rwanda from September 1 to 10, 2021), and developing the Engagement Platoon Handbook.

More recently, however, there has been a shift

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32 Interviews with OMA officials, November 2019, December 2020, and January 2021.

33 Interviews with current and former OMA officials, November 2019, March 2020, and January 2021; interviews with military peacekeeping trainers, January 2021 and February 2021.

34 For more detail, see: Sarah-Myriam Martin-Brûlé, "Finding the UN Way on Peacekeeping-Intelligence," International Peace Institute, April 2020, p. 20.

35 Interview with senior military official at UN headquarters, February 2021.

36 The author would like to thank Lotte Vermeij for bringing this point to her attention.

37 Interviews with former OMA gender adviser, November 2019 and December 2020.

38 Interview with former gender adviser, November 2019.

39 IPI research workshop; interview with former gender adviser, December 2019.

toward a mixed-gender approach (see Box 2 on all-women versus mixed-gender engagement teams). Concerns emerged within OMA leadership that a stand-alone all-women unit would not be able to integrate properly into the full battalion, an issue that would be reinforced by separate housing. Others were concerned such an approach could be

seen as a way to simply "tick the box" of deploying more women, and infantry personnel might see all-women teams as a form of "affirmative action." Some interviewees and questionnaire respondents also criticized the practice of deploying men to accompany all-women ETs for their protection during patrols (as discussed in more detail below).[40]

Box 2. All-women or mixed-gender engagement teams?

Both the UN and national militaries have gone back and forth over the years on whether all-women or mixed-gender approaches to community engagement are more effective.[41] Overall, however, the trajectory has been toward mixed-gender engagement teams. When asked about the configuration of the teams they patrol with, no questionnaire respondents indicated that they always patrol on all-women teams. About half indicated that they always patrol on mixed-gender teams, while a significant number patrol on both single-gender and mixed-gender teams.

Several interviewees felt that between all-women and mixed-gender teams, one was not necessarily better than the other. One interviewee encapsulated this viewpoint by saying, "I don't think you can say single-gender is better or mixed-gender is better. It's going to depend on the cultural context [of the operating environment] every time."[42] Another interviewee stated that most of the time mixed-gender teams seem more effective because they "mirror the society," though she also emphasized that certain contexts require all-women teams, depending on the mission.[43]

Others indicated they believe that mixed-gender engagement teams are more effective than all-women engagement teams, though few gave concrete reasons beyond their individual opinions and experiences.[44] One woman in the US military who had previously been deployed to Afghanistan said that she initially "'drank the Kool-Aid' and believed that [all-women engagement teams] would change the world," but, by the end of her deployment, she believed that mixed-gender teams were better.[45] Experts emphasized that mixed-gender teams have more diversity of thought, perspective, background, and experience.[46] An argument for mixed-gender EPs was that all members of the platoon would train together from the beginning, thus "normalizing" the fact that men and women are doing the same job.[47]

The questionnaires reflected both of these perspectives (see Figures 3 and 4). Overall, a majority of respondents rated both all-women and mixed-gender engagement teams as effective, but the proportion was higher for mixed-gender teams (86 percent versus 62 percent). When asked which were more effective, 68 percent of respondents chose mixed-gender teams, while just 18 percent chose all-women teams. Moreover, 34 percent of respondents said that all-women teams were not effective versus just 4 percent for mixed-gender teams. There was also a notable difference between men and women, with men significantly more likely to rate all-women teams as ineffective.

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40 The example given of a mission undertaking this practice was UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Interview with former gender adviser, December 2019.

41 Participants in the January 2020 workshop cited both Germany and the United Kingdom as examples of states that have seesawed between women-only, to mixed-gender, and sometimes back to gender-split trainings and patrols. IPI research workshop.

42 Interview with member of the US military, February 2021.

43 Interview with peacekeeping trainer, February 2021.

44 Interviews with OMA officials, August 2019, December 2019, November 2020, December 2020, and January 2021. This is also consistent with CIVIC findings. Lauren Spink, "'We Have to Try to Break the Silence Somehow': Preventing Conflict-Related Sexual Violence through UN Peacekeeping," Center for Civilians in Conflict, October 2020.

45 Interview with member of the US military, February 2021.

46 IPI expert workshop, December 2020. This is also a strong argument for all kinds of diversity—not just gender—including sexual and gender minorities and people of different races and socioeconomic status. All of this requires challenging dominant narratives of what is and is not professional and what is and is not "correct leadership."

47 Interview with expert close to the EP policy-development process, January 2020.

Given these concerns, OMA has gradually shifted away from all-women engagement teams to mixed-gender engagement platoons—a shift that is reflected in the UN's emerging policy framework on gendered community engagement.

A Growing Body of Policies and Guidance

While missions have been ahead of headquarters in conceptualizing ETs, the UN has recently begun to institutionalize gendered community engagement into its military peace operations. This has been a long process. While many people have raised the idea of ETs at UN headquarters over the last several years, it took a while to get traction. The UN had to develop the concept then bring as many TCCs as it could on board. Interviewees familiar with the process pointed to the innate challenges of institutionalizing a new concept within the UN system, with many UN entities and member states all trying to influence the concept itself, its translation into

Figure 3. Perceived comparative effectiveness of all-women versus mixed-gender engagement teams

"In your opinion, are [all-women/mixed-gender] engagement teams *more effective* at achieving operational goals?"
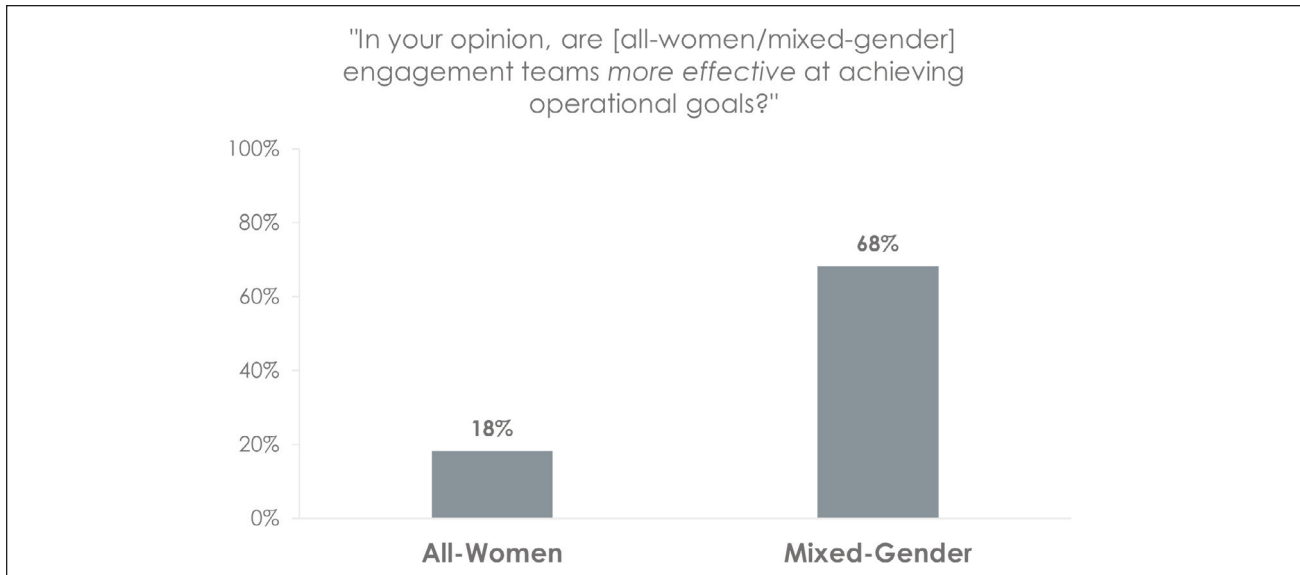
Figure 4. Perceived effectiveness of all-women and mixed-gender engagement teams

"In your opinion, are [all-women/mixed-gender] engagement teams *effective* in achieving the strategic priorities and operational goals of [mission]?"
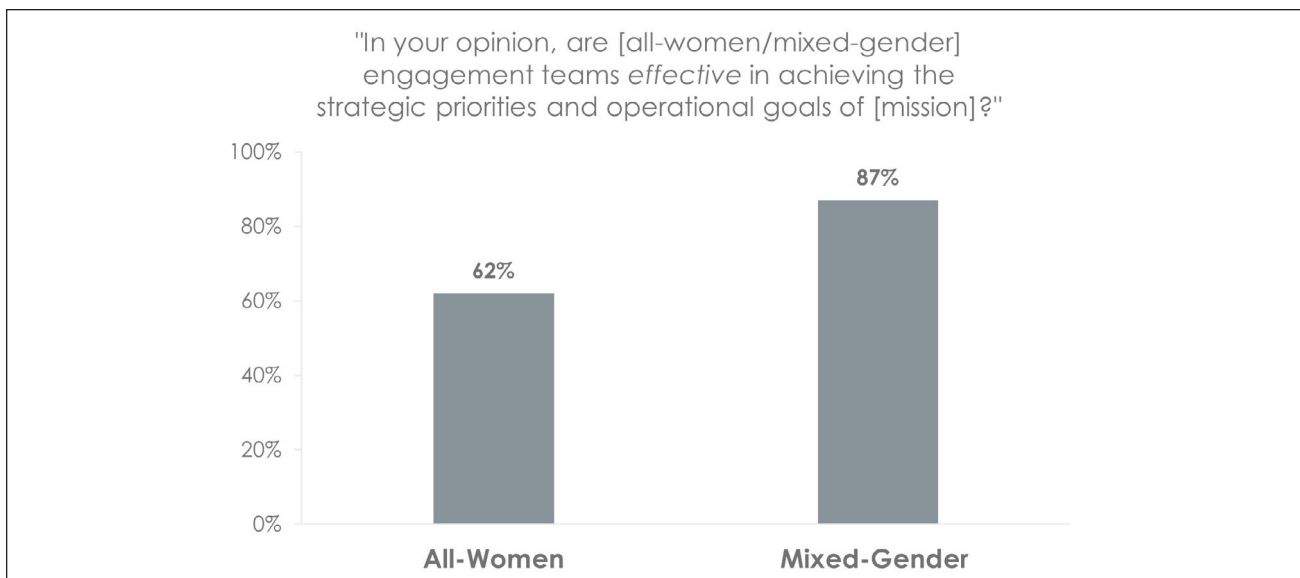
policies, and its implementation.[48]

There have been four key developments in military policy and guidance related to ETs: the January 2020 version of the UN Infantry Battalion Manual (UNIBAM), the forthcoming Engagement Platoons Handbook, MONUSCO's Practice Note, and UN Security Council Resolution 2538 (see Table 2).[49] Relatedly, OMA and the Integrated Training Service (ITS) rolled out their engagement

platoons pilot training in September 2021.[50]

UN Infantry Battalion Manual's Guidance on Engagement Platoons

In January 2020, OMA released the latest version of its Infantry Battalion Manual (UNIBAM). While the previous UNIBAM (2012) did not mention ETs, this new version introduces the concept of EPs and provides detailed guidance for operational-

Table 2. UN military policies related to engagement teams and platoons

Document	Date Issued	Type of Engagement Addressed	Main Points
UNIBAM'S Guidance on Engagement Platoons	January 2020	Engagement platoons	• Identifies unique responsibilities of EPs within battalions • Provides guidance for TCCs' formation of EPs
Engagement Platoons Handbook	2021 (forthcoming)	Engagement platoons	• Links EPs with women, peace, and security agenda • Details EPs' responsibilities and offers guidance to TCCs and mission leadership • Identifies EPs' added value to communities
MONUSCO Practice Note	March 2021	All-women and mixed-gender engagement teams	• Links ETs with women, peace, and security agenda • Provides a comprehensive overview of MONUSCO's practices regarding ETs • Provides recommendations for TCCs, other missions, and OMA
UN Security Council Resolution 2538	August 2020	Mixed-gender engagement teams	• Recognizes that gender balance among peacekeepers is important to effective community engagement • Calls for establishment of mixed-gender engagement teams

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48 Interview with senior military official at UN headquarters, February 2021; interviews with former force gender adviser, November 2019 and December 2020; interviews with former OMA gender adviser, August 2019 and November 2020; interview with military trainer, December 2019; interviews with OMA official, December 2019 and December 2020; interview with military official involved in the EP policy-drafting process, January 2020.

49 UN DPO, "UNIBAM: Second Edition"; UN Security Council Resolution 2538 (August 28, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2538. The military policies discussed here are the policies most relevant to recent developments and debates related to ETs and EPs. There are numerous other sources of UN guidance that are not specific to the military or to ETs or EPs but that sometimes cite ETs or EPs as examples or provide information on how their objectives fit into a larger approach to gendered community engagement. These include the Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping Handbook; Gender Responsive UN Peacekeeping Operations Policy; Gender Equality and Women, Peace, and Security Resource Package; and Handbook for United Nations Field Missions on Preventing and Responding to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence. Military peace operations should ensure that they are referring to these resources from headquarters to the mission level.

50 This training was originally scheduled to begin in 2020 but has been delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

izing them within battalions.[51] The UNIBAM's guidance on EPs is designed to complement the forthcoming EP Handbook and training protocol, both of which are expected to launch in 2021 after significant delays related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Eventually, OMA will expect all TCCs to deploy EPs as part of their infantry battalions.[52] EPs are made up of personnel holding any rank in and from any branch of the military.[53] They are "comprised of both women and men in order to facilitate interaction with the entire community."[54] They are also required to have a minimum of 50 percent women personnel, and at least one command role must be held by a woman. Each EP consists of several ETs (see Figure 5). According to the UNIBAM:

> [EPs] will operate as teams, containing four personnel per team. Battalions with three companies will have four ETs in the [EP]. Battalions with four companies will have five ETs. The number of engagement teams accompanying a patrol will depend on the task and situation on ground. However, it is recommended that there should be a minimum of two women per patrol.[55]

While this configuration will eventually be standardized, the institutionalization will take a long time, and both TCCs and missions seem likely to continue forming and deploying ad hoc ETs in the meantime.

The primary goals of EPs are largely aligned with what ETs have already been doing on an ad hoc or informal basis for several years. Their stated mission is "to enhance the situational awareness of the battalion by mapping the demography of the [area of operation] in order to identify vulnerable areas and at-risk populations."[56] Their activities include interacting with community leaders, reporting "relevant information" about local populations' "stated needs and interests," gathering information, and conducting joint patrols with civilian staff from the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) section, particularly "for reassurance and support when it is known that women and children have entered the DDR process."[57] EPs also "conduct gender perspective-inclusive Village Assessments… to improve situational awareness."[58]

The UNIBAM specifies that EPs are "closely aligned" with missions' civil-military coordination (CIMIC) sections: EPs offer their "tactical 'first responder' capability," while CIMIC sections offer deeper "expertise and experience."[59] This alignment could help TCCs deploy and train EPs going forward; one peacekeeper said that prior to deploying with the UN, she worked on CIMIC programs in her home country that closely resemble the work she is now doing with ETs at MONUSCO.[60] Likewise, questionnaire respondents named CIMIC activities forty times in their responses to an open-ended question about the activities of ETs. The UNIBAM also calls on EPs and CIMIC sections to coordinate, integrate, and liaise with military gender advisers and women's protection advisers at sector headquarters and names these advisers as potential "appropriate section[s]" for EPs to report to.[61]

Engagement Platoons Handbook

The forthcoming Engagement Platoons Handbook expands on the concept and operationalization of EPs beyond what is possible within the UNIBAM.

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51 For the previous edition, see: UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and Department of Field Support (DFS), "United Nations Infantry Battalion Manual: Volume I," August 2012.

52 Once the EP Handbook is released—and TCCs therefore have guidance for implementing these platoons—OMA expects to set a year by which all TCCs will need to deploy EPs.

53 EPs will be optional in specialist infantry battalions such as quick reaction forces and special forces units, "as these are designed for offensive actions rather than engagement." UN DPO, "UNIBAM: Second Edition," p. 67.

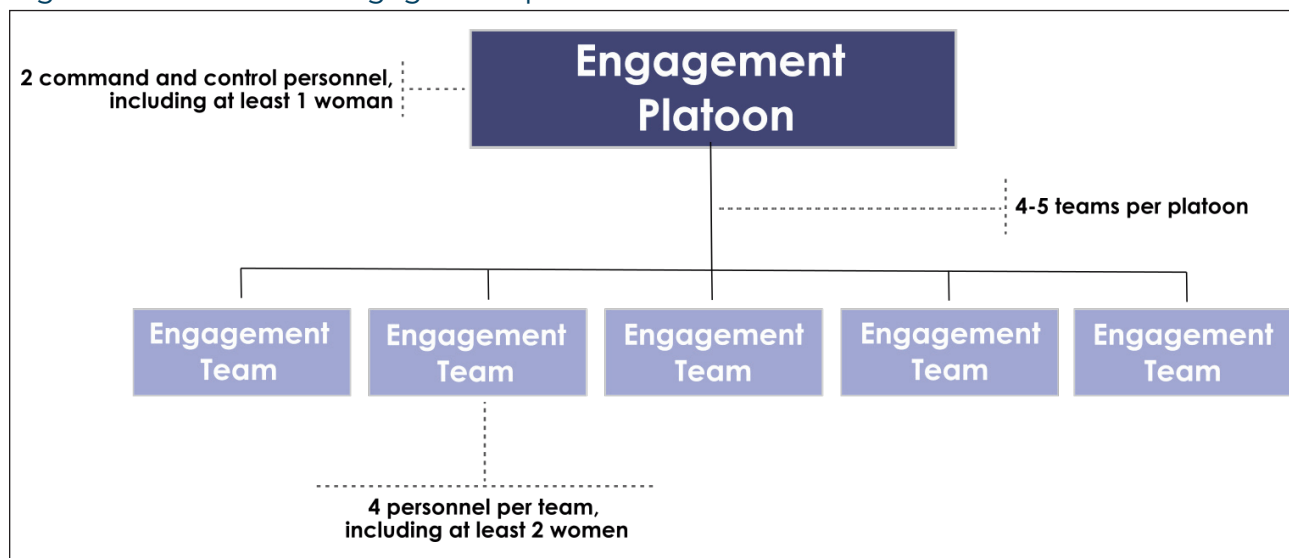54 Ibid., p. 17.

55 Ibid., p. 67.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid., pp. 17, 21, 49.

58 Ibid., p. 68.

59 Ibid.

60 Interview with women peacekeepers deployed to MONUSCO.

61 UN DPO, "UNIBAM: Second Edition," pp. 17–18, 68.

Figure 5. Structure of engagement platoons[62]

It highlights that inclusivity in community engagement is key. EPs should "aim to be as inclusive as possible with women, men, and children" involved in interactions. They should also "acknowledge and respect [communities'] diversity… accept different agendas [and ensure] that dominant special interest groups are not the only voices heard."[63]

The handbook is comprehensive, providing deep dives into the core functions and tasks of EPs; special skills and knowledge EP members will be expected to have; procedures for how EPs should relate to and work with community liaison assistants, gender and child protection focal points, civil affairs personnel, and mission leaders; training coursework; and evaluation guidance. It also highlights the three areas where EPs have the most added value: increasing access, improving information and understanding, and providing a sense of involvement for all parties.

MONUSCO Practice Note

Some guidance has also emerged at the mission level. In March 2021, MONUSCO finalized a best-practice note titled "MONUSCO's Engagement Teams: Promoting the Women, Peace and Security Mandate," and OMA, in close coordination with the Policy, Evaluation, and Training Division (DPET) of DPO, circulated the document to

military leadership at all UN missions. OMA highlighted that MONUSCO's work to develop and document the use of ETs provides an unofficial starting point for reviewing and identifying best practices and challenges as well as proposing recommendations (see Box 3 on ETs in MONUSCO). In communication around the dissemination of the note, OMA explicitly noted ETs' links to the women, peace, and security agenda and the secretary-general's Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) initiative.

The MONUSCO Practice Note organizes ETs' contributions, roles, and best practices according to the four pillars of the women, peace, and security agenda: participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery. It also suggests future priorities for ETs, including coordinating around the protection of civilians and DDR, providing gender-based analysis and planning, facilitating the participation of local women in dialogues, and increasing uniformed women's participation in UN military patrols. In addition, it provides recommendations for missions, TCCs, and OMA.

UN Security Council Resolution 2538

Beyond the policy and guidance developed within the UN Secretariat and in individual missions, ETs have also gained attention from member states in

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62 Interview with former UN official, May 2021; interview with current UN official, June 2021.
63 UN DPO, "EP Handbook," p. 4.

Box 3. MONUSCO: A pioneer of UN engagement teams

The UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) has used ETs in an ad hoc manner at least since 2015.[64] Over the years, troop-contributing countries have deployed more ETs to MONUSCO. In tandem, mission personnel have institutionalized certain norms around ETs. Currently, ETs in MONUSCO are mixed-gender.

Like in other missions, ETs in MONUSCO take on a variety of responsibilities. Interviewees divided their activities into two groups: operational and non-operational.[65] Under their operational responsibilities, ETs carry out area-domination patrols. They go to various locations across the DRC, stay there a few days to interact with locals and collect information, and then report their findings through their command structures. As in other missions, these reporting practices are inconsistent, and ETs are not allowed to directly liaise with mission personnel who could benefit from the information they gather (e.g., the force gender adviser, child protection officers, or peacekeeping-intelligence officers).[66]

MONUSCO's ETs also engage in a range of non-operational activities in collaboration with the mission's civilian sections, including CIMIC, child protection, and DDR personnel.[67] ETs sometimes carry out these activities as all-women teams, though uniformed men are still present for protection. For example, ETs have helped to implement quick-impact projects (QIPs) such as the construction of bridges and schools. One ET implemented vocational trainings at a school that it had "adopted."[68] Other ETs put on a health screening and awareness campaign focused on COVID-19 and sexual health as part of a broader effort to reach civilians in conflict hotspots; during this nine-day campaign, three ETs engaged with almost 1,500 women.[69] Some interviewees expressed enthusiasm about their involvement in these non-operational activities. One woman peacekeeper involved in the health screening and awareness campaign said she felt "campaigns like this are more effective than patrols" and suggested that there is potential to broaden such activities further, for example by interacting with teenage boys who could see them as "aunties or big sisters."[70] Another military peacekeeper pointed out that engaging in humanitarian work is good for ETs because "we are able to interact in places where humanitarians can't go."[71]

However, this same interviewee acknowledged that such work should involve closer collaboration and information sharing with the mission's civilian sections, the humanitarian clusters, and other UN agencies. Others pointed to the potential risks of expanding peacekeepers' mandates beyond security and protection: military peacekeepers may be better placed to collect information on and communicate community needs while leaving humanitarian or development actors to respond to them.

A related issue is that communities' perceptions of military peacekeepers carrying out humanitarian activities are not always positive. As one interviewee said, "People are suspicious we are doing this for a hidden agenda, such as to gain information."[72] Some ETs in MONUSCO have handed out surveys to participants in

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64 MONUSCO refers to ETs as "FETs," though one woman peacekeeper emphasized the importance of shifting to "ETs" over "FETs" because the gender-neutral term better conveys that uniformed personnel should be treated equally, while "FETs" exacerbates the conditions under which male colleagues see women in uniform differently. Interview with woman peacekeeper deployed to MONUSCO, January 2021.

65 Interviews with men and women peacekeepers deployed to MONUSCO, January 2021 and February 2021; interview with former MONUSCO force gender adviser, January 2021.

66 "MONUSCO Practice Note," p. 16.

67 "MONUSCO Practice Note." Members of one ET indicated that they had not collaborated with other mission components at all but attributed this to their newness to the mission.

68 Interview with two military peacekeepers deployed to MONUSCO, March 2020.

69 Interview with ET commander deployed to MONUSCO, January 2021.

70 Interview with female peacekeeper deployed to MONUSCO, January 2021.

71 Interview with male peacekeeper deployed to MONUSCO, January 2021.

72 Interview with male peacekeeper deployed to MONUSCO, January 2021.

their activities to collect basic information about their experiences or to ascertain their needs, but this practice is not standardized nor is the information collected always used. Indeed, the survey of community participants in the nine-day health-screening initiative never made it to the force gender adviser before the ET commander leading the survey left MONUSCO. As such, the mission cannot quantify how those 1,500 women felt about the campaign or input their perspectives into future planning.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also been a challenge for the ETs in MONUSCO. Interviewees emphasized that effective community engagement requires maintaining relationships and showing commitment through their physical presence. However, the necessary precautions taken to limit the spread of the virus have limited their interactions with local communities and impeded relationship building.[73]

Overall, MONUSCO is using ETs more systematically than any other UN mission. Due to the consistent commitment of many force gender advisers, senior mission leaders, and military peacekeepers, MONUSCO has been able to gather data on the use of ETs over time and institutionalize some best practices as well as point to structural challenges.[74] At the same time, ETs' roles are not always clear and can be dependent on the personalities of team commanders, personal relationships with civilian sections, and ET members' perceptions of host communities' expectations. Oversight can be difficult: in at least one case, a MONUSCO contingent that was supposed to be using ETs did not appear to be doing so due to lack of buy-in from leadership.[75] Moreover, most peacekeepers in MONUSCO still report receiving no specialized pre-deployment training on gendered community engagement, though some contingents have received in-mission training. Members of ETs in MONUSCO also consistently pointed to a need for more women language assistants, smoother handovers, better data collection and reporting, and more collaboration with civilian sections.[76]

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the Security Council. Adopted in August 2020, Security Council Resolution 2538 is the first resolution dedicated to uniformed women's participation in UN peace operations. It explicitly names the establishment of *mixed-gender* engagement teams as integral to uniformed women's full, effective, and meaningful participation.

Unlike many other initiatives to increase women's uniformed participation, the resolution does not rely on gendered stereotypes. Instead, it "emphasizes cooperation, collaboration, and understanding among peacekeepers of any gender."[77] It is also unique in that it does not explicitly sit within the set of resolutions on women, peace, and security and is instead situated within the peacekeeping agenda more broadly.

Engagement Teams in Practice

While a few TCCs have already deployed EPs, it will take a long time for the UN's guidance to fully take hold.[78] In the interim, it is important to document and report on what ETs—whether ad hoc or institutionalized—are currently doing. Such documentation can also inform revisions to policy and guidance, which will not (nor should) be static. This section looks at the roles ETs have been performing in practice and how these roles have been shaped by gendered assumptions (on the roles performed by ETs, see Figure 6).

This section and the following section draw

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73 Interview with female peacekeepers deployed to MONUSCO, October 2020.

74 "MONUSCO Practice Note."

75 Interview with female peacekeeper deployed to MONUSCO, October 2020.

76 However, request for women language assistants has been signed off on. Written exchange with MONUSCO personnel, October 2021.

77 Dustin Johnson and Gretchen Baldwin, "Women in Peacekeeping: Signs of Change at the United Nations?" *IPI Global Observatory*, September 17, 2020.

78 Interviews with UN military leadership, December 2020, January 2021, and February 2021.

primarily on interviews with peacekeepers who have patrolled with ETs in various military contexts (both UN and non-UN) as well as a questionnaire completed by 262 respondents that was distributed by missions' military leaders and force gender advisers (see Annex for more detailed information about the questionnaire respondents). Fifty-two of the completed questionnaires were identical to at least one other questionnaire within the same battalion. While this does raise questions about the agency of respondents—individuals may have been guided to give the same responses as their peers—the data is nevertheless useful. If leadership gave guidance to fill out the question-naires in a particular way, this may illuminate their priorities for ETs and point to institutional goals around community engagement. The duplicates may also simply indicate that respondents were saying what they felt was expected by mission leaders, particularly as the questionnaires were distributed by mission personnel rather than a third party.
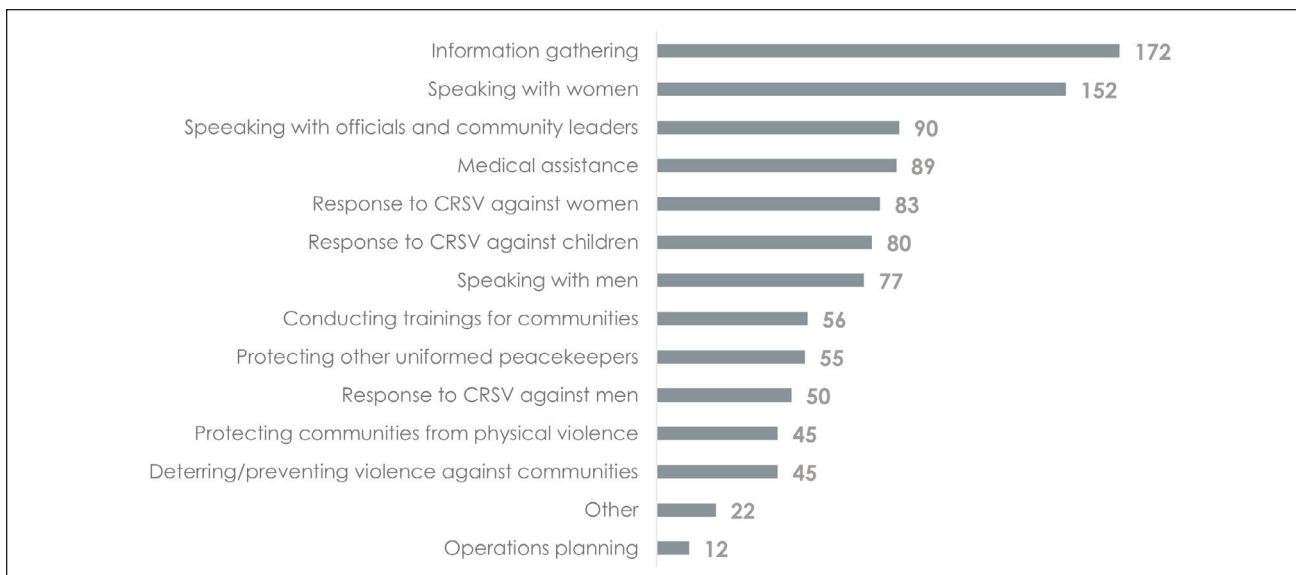
When the questionnaires were distributed, missions were asked to survey both women and men, though the vast majority of respondents self-identified as women (see Annex). The perspectives of both women and men are important given that most questionnaire respondents and interviewees indicated that mixed-gender engagement teams are preferred.

According to questionnaire respondents, the main activities carried out by ETs on patrol are gathering information from and speaking with host communities. They also reported playing a role in responding to conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), protecting other peacekeepers, preventing violence against civilians in host communities, providing medical assistance, and conducting trainings.

Gathering Information

Both interviewees and questionnaire respondents indicated that information gathering is the most common activity performed by ETs; more than 90 percent of questionnaire respondents from MINUSMA, MONUSCO, and UNMISS selected it, making it by far the most common response. With the growing focus on community-level, people-centric peacekeeping, ETs are increasingly involved in gathering information. Information gathering at the community level enables peacekeepers to analyze and respond to threats both to themselves and to the communities they are mandated to protect. It is also critical for understanding community perspectives on the consequences (intended or otherwise) of national-level initiatives, differences in perception among diverse groups of people (including among people of diverse genders), and trends "unrelated to national-level politics" that may warrant a UN peacekeeping response.[79]

Figure 6. Activities carried out by engagement teams on patrol

Activity	Value
Information gathering	172
Speaking with women	152
Speeaking with officials and community leaders	90
Medical assistance	89
Response to CRSV against women	83
Response to CRSV against children	80
Speaking with men	77
Conducting trainings for communities	56
Protecting other uniformed peacekeepers	55
Response to CRSV against men	50
Protecting communities from physical violence	45
Deterring/preventing violence against communities	45
Other	22
Operations planning	12

In MINUSCA, for example, the Zambian women who started the first ET recognized that their operation could not be successful without getting diverse perspectives on what was happening locally. Their primary objective, therefore, was to collect information for their battalion. At the same time, they were disseminating information to community members to set expectations about how much the UN could do and emphasize that the burden of long-term, sustainable change fell to the host community.[80]

Interviewees across missions pointed out that peace operations must not rely on information gathered at the community level by only speaking to half the population (men). They reported that including military women in community engagement efforts—most notably ETs—increases the chances that information gathering will involve consultation with women and include gender-related inputs. ETs can also increase the likelihood that women in host communities will report sensitive information such as incidents of conflict-related sexual violence that they may not feel comfortable reporting to men (see below).[81] Likewise, because women are usually the primary caretakers for children, they can often communicate to peacekeepers not only about their own needs but also those of children. One interviewee characterized ETs as "the alert system for incidents specifically happening to women and children."[82]

A story related by a military woman deployed as a peacekeeper to MONUSCO in 2015 helps illustrate this point: following reports of attacks against civilians—mostly women and girls—in a particular village, the peacekeeper requested that Tanzanian peacekeepers who spoke Swahili join her to gather more information. She also asked that those peacekeepers be women, given the reported victim demographics. At first, mission leadership did not understand why she wanted to talk to the Congolese women and wanted to send all-men special forces. Nevertheless, she got two Tanzanian women peacekeepers to join her. In the village, the head of the village administration laughed and did not understand why she wanted to speak to women, but she and the women peacekeepers still talked to the women separately. The difficulties she encountered in the planning and approval process proved worthwhile. The women were open with them about rape, saying that "at night it's armed groups, and in the daytime it's the Congolese military." One woman in the village told the peacekeeper who had arranged the discussions that no one had ever asked them about any of this before because other peacekeepers had not seen the value in women's perspectives.[83]

As missions devote increasing attention to peacekeeping-intelligence, ETs and EPs could come to play an even greater role in gathering information.[84] In MONUSCO, for example, ETs build on the mission's peacekeeping-intelligence and assist with drafting operational plans. One military intelligence officer felt that "FETs could be one of the most powerful things… missions are doing…. The intelligence value [of ETs] could be tremendous." At the same time, she lamented that ETs are not always integrated into existing peacekeeping-intelligence frameworks: "I don't think it's effective right now. I don't have any connection with [ET members]. I would love to, but it's not within the [mission] structure."[85] Considering the parallels made by many interviewees between FETs in Afghanistan and ETs and EPs in UN missions, it also bears repeating that UN peacekeeping-intelligence is very different in nature and purpose from the counterterrorism

> Interviewees reported that including military women in community engagement efforts increases the chances that information gathering will involve consultation with women.

79 UN DPO Policy & Best Practices Service and UN DFS, "Peacekeeping Practice Note: Community Engagement," March 2018, p. 9.
80 Interview with woman military peacekeeper deployed to MINUSCA, July 2020.
81 Interviews in December 2019, January 2020, July 2020, November 2020, January 2021, and February 2021.
82 Interview with male military peacekeeper deployed to MONUSCO, March 2020.
83 Interview with former MONUSCO force gender adviser, December 2019.
84 On UN peacekeeping-intelligence, see: Martin-Brûlé, "Finding the UN Way on Peacekeeping-Intelligence."
85 Interview with G2 military intelligence officer, March 2021.

intelligence conducted by many national militaries.

Building Trust and Serving as Positive Examples

Beyond information gathering, interviewees identified broader effects of community engagement by ETs related to the presence of women peacekeepers. Women peacekeepers in ETs build trust and relationships between the peacekeeping force and community members and build confidence in the UN's mandate. Interviewees in MONUSCO stated that ETs "normalize the face of the force" and "act as a link to the gender focal point," who can then address community members' problems more fully.[86]

Many in the UN system characterize women peacekeepers as positive examples for women in host communities. One interviewee emphasized that information gathering is not only about accomplishing specific tasks like CRSV response or operational planning; it is also about showing that women in the military exist: "It breaks up this perception that it's always male peacekeepers."[87] This attitude was shared by interviewees who were deployed to FETs in Afghanistan, who stated that FETs created excitement among Afghan women and that just having women visible was impactful on the "local culture."[88] Overall, many interviewees shared a general sentiment that FETs in Afghanistan and ETs in UN peace operations "mean a lot to local women."[89]

As mentioned above, many interviewees felt that women peacekeepers are able to engage with host communities more effectively than men. One interviewee said that military women were more popular, more engaged, and more outgoing than

> Engagement teams can "normalize the face of the force" and "act as a link to the gender focal point."

their male counterparts: "We wanted locals to reach out to us. The reception was always good."[90] This connection with women in host communities could stem from unexpected sources. One interviewee formerly deployed to MONUSCO cited the nail polish worn by troops from one TCC as a reason the local women began speaking with the military women, indicating that this overt display of femininity put them at ease.[91] Another interviewee from MONUSCO said that "FETs interact with the women when the other leaders are interacting with the men" and stated that women are "playful" with other women and more comfortable than they are with men.[92] The overwhelming majority of questionnaire respondents indicated that women from host communities are more likely to talk to uniformed women peacekeepers than uniformed men.

Interviewees and questionnaire respondents emphasized language skills as essential for effective community engagement by ETs. Even if a peacekeeper does not have fluency in the local language, using basic phrases such as greetings can help establish a rapport and a level of comfort and trust between peacekeepers and community members. One interviewee said that she has noticed the difference her basic Swahili skills make in the DRC and has taken it upon herself to provide language training to other military women so they can do the same.[93] Another interviewee noted that ETs that could communicate directly in French with francophone community members while on patrol were more successful.[94] In cases where ET members did not share a language with local communities, many interviewees cited the lack of women in interpreter and community liaison assistant positions as a significant barrier to community engagement. This has forced some members of ETs to put in extra time to learn local languages. While these efforts

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86   Interview with two military peacekeepers deployed to MONUSCO, March 2020.

87   Interview with former force gender adviser, December 2019.

88   Interviews with women members of the Australian, UK, and US militaries, November 2020, December 2020, February 2021, and March 2021.

89   Interview with military peacekeeper deployed to MONUSCO, March 2021. This sentiment was expressed across several interviews. There does not appear to be comprehensive data avaiable—from the UN or any other source—on host community members' actual sentiments toward ETs.

90   Interview with peacekeeper formerly deployed to MINUSCA, July 2020.

91   Interview with former MONUSCO force gender adviser, December 2020.

92   Interview with peacekeeper formerly deployed to MONUSCO, March 2021.

93   Interview with peacekeeper deployed to MONUSCO, February 2020.

94   Interview with former force gender adviser, December 2020.

are admirable, they speak to women needing to go "above and beyond" to effectively do their jobs.

Responding to CRSV and Protecting Civilians

When asked about the activities carried out by ETs, the first role cited by almost all interviewees, both at UN headquarters and in missions, was responding to women's protection concerns specific to CRSV (though less than half of questionnaire respondents selected this as an activity of ETs).[95] For example, one interviewee said that her ET had been a valuable resource for women to report sexual violence in rural areas, where the stigma is greater than in urban areas. Because of this stigma, it can be important for a third party like UN peacekeepers to be available as a resource for reporting and providing protection.[96] However, there is little concrete data on whether ETs are more or less effective than other troops at community engagement related to CRSV.[97]

More generally, ETs can play a role in deterring or preventing violence against host communities or protecting host communities from physical violence. One military leader of a prominent TCC stated that "the principal goal [of ETs and EPs] is to minimize human rights violations against the local population."[98] He continued, saying, "I am convinced that FETs or METs are really necessary to achieve [this objective]. It is a very important tool for the battalion commander at the moment to anticipate a possible human rights attack."[99] While this response aligns with the EP Handbook, most interviewees who are currently deployed to ETs indicated this is not one of the main objectives of ETs in practice. They suggested that if ETs are to play a greater role in protection, they will need to shift their operational goals, communicate these to infantry members, and provide training. Similarly, less than a quarter of questionnaire respondents noted protection as one of the activities carried out by ETs.

Providing Ad Hoc Assistance in Other Areas

Peacekeepers from multiple missions indicated that they were also involved in engagement activities related to humanitarian or development aid, often as a secondary activity (the primary activity still being information gathering or other mandate-related tasks). These activities included public health campaigns, building projects, economic advancement and vocational trainings, and miscellaneous educational tasks.

For example, the Zambian members of the first ET in MINUSCA were primarily deployed to gather information, but they also engaged in more ad hoc ways with "youth and women" they identified who were either involved in or had the potential to be involved in certain economic activities. They gave advice on small matters like how to stack tomatoes in a way that is more appealing to customers and that would attract more business, taught them skills related to farming, and demonstrated "better" practices to prevent COVID-19 and improve sexual and reproductive health through health and hygiene trainings.[100] Respondents deployed to MINUSCA also identified awareness raising on gender-based violence and CRSV, vocational trainings, and malnutrition education as additional activities undertaken by ETs.

In MONUSCO and UNMISS, ETs have been involved in the missions' COVID-19 response, offering community health education to raise awareness. MONUSCO interviewees and questionnaire respondents also named multiple community-development projects they were involved with, including facilitating literacy classes and livelihood trainings (e.g., on sewing or computer literacy), assisting with construction projects, providing women's rights education, and raising awareness of sexual and reproductive health. In UNMISS, respondents listed menstrual-hygiene trainings, sewing and computer-literacy

95   The discrepancy between interviewees and questionnaire respondents could be attributable to interviewees (who include more individuals at UN headquarters and in mission leadership positions compared to individuals deployed at the contingent level) speaking more to high-level, mandate-related goals.

96   Interview with woman military peacekeeper deployed to MONUSCO, December 2020.

97   Spink, "'We Have to Try to Break the Silence Somehow.'"

98   Interview with TCC military leadership, January 2021.

99   Interview with TCC military leadership, January 2021.

100 Interview with woman military peacekeeper deployed to MINUSCA, July 2020.

classes, unexploded-ordnance sensitization, and civil-military cooperation as additional activities. Interviewees from MINUSMA noted that the mission has a different approach to community engagement than other missions; while question-naire respondents listed civil-military cooperation, they indicated that they do not undertake trainings for host communities.

Compared to activities like information gathering that are more directly linked to mission mandates, many of these additional activities conducted by ETs are ad hoc. Interviewees indicated that there are positive aspects to the improvised nature of these activities: ETs in multiple missions were able to respond to non-conflict emergency situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic by offering community-level sensitization, for example.

However, others pointed out that these activities typically fall outside of military mandates and risk blurring the lines between civilian and military peacekeepers. In Afghanistan, for example, FETs were sometimes used to carry out education projects such as teaching English while in uniform. Officials also stressed that diffusing ETs' responsibilities by using them in an ad hoc manner to support community-development projects or humanitarian responses may hinder them from developing a more specialized skill set. It may also lead them to engage in activities in which they lack training. Mirroring the Afghanistan example mentioned above, some military peacekeepers indicated that they sometimes took on ad hoc teaching projects despite not being trained teachers.

> Engagement teams and engagement platoons will not be an overnight success—overcoming barriers to effective community engagement will take time.

Operational Challenges facing ETs

ETs face not only challenges of how to understand their role and design their activities but also operational challenges related to the continued use

of ETs and the introduction of EPs. These include concerns related to training, institutional buy-in, deployment, coordination and integration, documentation and reporting, and sexual harass-ment. To address these challenges, leaders both in missions and at headquarters must recognize that ETs and EPs will not be an overnight success, nor should they be. Overcoming these barriers to effective community engagement will take time, especially considering that the COVID-19 pandemic has delayed the rollout of EPs.

Rolling Out Training for ETs and EPs

While much of the work of ETs has been ad hoc, some pre-deployment training has been implemented.[101] While ET trainings have not been widespread, interviewees who had conducted these trainings reported that they have been successful and well-received.[102] As part of the rollout of EPs, OMA had been planning a pilot training specifically targeting members of EPs for mid-2020.[103] As laid out in the EP Handbook, this training is meant to give members of EPs a set of specific skills (e.g., interviewing members of host communities, cultural competency, language skills, negotiation).

An in-person pilot training for the Engagement Platoon Reinforcement Training Package was run in Rwanda from September 1 to 10, 2021—over one year after originally scheduled. Its aim is to specially train both men and women peacekeepers to interact with all members of the host community (men, women, boys, and girls). The comprehensive training package being tested includes both pre-deployment and in-mission training; standardiza-tion of language, clarification of concepts, and layout will be finalized following the pilot. At the time of writing, personnel from OMA and the Integrated Training Service plan to finalize the EP Handbook and the training package based on the pilot, run a validation workshop in early 2022, and

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101 Interview with Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI) personnel, January 2021.

102 Interview with peacekeeping trainer/gender expert, February 2021; interview with GPOI personnel, January 2021.

103 Interview with expert close to the EP policy-development process, January 2021.

begin more systematically distributing the training package to TCCs before mid-2022.[104]

The pandemic has also impacted funding for the gendered community engagement trainings that did exist—in some cases causing them to be indefinitely delayed—and has disrupted staffing related to ETs.[105] For example, MONUSCO experienced an absence of force gender leadership in 2020 when the pandemic delayed the replacement of the force gender and child protection advisers, who are closely involved in tracking the activity of ETs, including in-mission trainings.[106]

Securing Individual and Institutional Buy-In

The development of EPs has been driven by individual advocates at UN headquarters, in missions, and in TCCs. These advocates have often met resistance in military decision-making structures. Ultimately, the implementation of EPs at the field level is dependent on the buy-in of individual leaders at UN headquarters and in the field, as well as the determination and dedication of those advocating for change. At the field level, implementation often depends on the experience and openness of force and battalion commanders as well as force gender advisers in some cases.[107] On the whole, such processes can be overly personality-driven, which can mean they are not institutionalized or seen through to the end.

Because of this dependence on individual buy-in, OMA will have to conduct outreach to sell the concept of EPs. One interviewee compared this process with the ongoing campaign to improve and increase military peacekeeping-intelligence. The UN will need to develop a campaign to spread awareness and understanding of EPs, convince peacekeeping-training centers to implement the training, and secure buy-in from TCCs and

mission leaders as well as military advisers and permanent representatives in New York.[108]

Among TCCs in particular, obtaining buy-in may confront cultural barriers, especially for TCCs whose militaries are not mixed-gender until UN force generation begins. When asked about challenges foreseen by OMA with the implementation of EPs, one interviewee said, "I can see only one challenge, and that's the cultural aspect: There are some TCCs that won't deploy women to the front lines."[109] More generally, a different interviewee pointed out that in order for gendered community engagement to be effective, TCCs must radically and transparently alter the gendered biases and barriers to more diverse participation within their own military organizations. As another interviewee observed, "self-reflexivity is key."[110] The UN has tools to force TCCs to deliver on EPs, such as by saying that a unit will not be deployed if it does not meet the requirements for EPs set out in the UNIBAM, but some say the UN must also consider more flexible options.[111]

Addressing Operational Challenges around Deployment

ETs have also faced operational challenges related to the deployment of team members, and these challenges will persist for EPs. One challenge is the duration of deployments. The typical twelve-month rotation for military personnel can be a barrier for parents—particularly women—to deploy, prompting the UN to offer shorter, six-month rotations for women staff officers and military observers with children under the age of seven.[112] However, these shorter rotation times can hinder effective community engagement by disrupting EPs' relationships with communities and contextual knowledge, in addition to making it harder for them to acquire local language skills.[113] Even if the

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104 Interview with OMA personnel, October 2021.

105 Interview with gender training expert, February 2021.

106 Interview with military peacekeeper deployed to MONUSCO, December 2020.

107 Interview with military trainer, December 2019; interview with MONUSCO official, December 2020; interview with former and current OMA officials, August 2019, December 2019, and March 2020; interview with former UNIFIL official, January 2020.

108 Interview with expert at OMA, February 2021.

109 Ibid.

110 Interview with member of the US military, February 2021.

111 Interview with expert at OMA, February 2021.

112 UN DPO, "Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy 2018–2028," 2018.

113 Henigson, "Community Engagement."

UN and TCCs assure that these shorter tours will not negatively affect military women's professional advancement, they are likely to diminish the ability of EPs to meaningfully engage with host communities. This concern aligns with critiques of FETs in Afghanistan as well: cultural acuity and trust are "not tools that are quickly acquired."[114]

This challenge is exacerbated by the fact that handovers to incoming battalion commanders or military observers are often "poor or lacking." As a result, "personnel often have to build up their own situational and contextual understanding…. [which] has the potential to fray relations with communities and is an inefficient way to generate and retain contextual knowledge."[115] There have been some attempts to address this challenge. For example, MONUSCO recently began issuing each ET a SIM card and mobile phone along with a shared email address to allow them to retain institutional knowledge and local contacts.[116]

Integrating ETs into Missions and Connecting Them to Headquarters

Many interviewees and questionnaire respondents indicated that information gathering is ETs' most critical task. However, for this information to have a significant impact not only on short-term military activities but also on longer-term substantive objectives, ETs must engage with other relevant offices in the mission. As mentioned above, this often does not happen. One intelligence officer said that she had little to no interaction with ETs, even though the mission she is deployed to uses them widely for gathering information that could feed into peacekeeping-intelligence.[117] Reports from ETs are often lost within the regular reporting to sector headquarters, meaning that any specialized information gathered by ETs is being underutilized

> Individual advocates for engagement teams and engagement platoons have often met resistance in military decision-making structures.

at best. The US FETs in Afghanistan faced a similar challenge. Gabrielle Cook wrote in 2015 that inconsistencies in the implementation of FETs, their exclusion from operational planning and decision-making processes, and lack of concrete data on their activities significantly decreased FETs' efficacy and the safety of all involved in their patrols.[118]

One challenge to integrating the work of ETs into missions' broader community engagement efforts is the lack of capacity within other relevant offices in the mission. Force gender advisers are often on their own; if they had a staff, they would have greater capacity to share information gathered by ETs with other components of the mission.

In addition to the lack of integration of ETs into missions at the field level, multiple interviewees cited the gap between missions and headquarters as a challenge to the design and implementation of EPs. Over the last several years, officials at OMA have held workshops and working-group meetings to discuss what EPs should look like, what they should be trained on, and what their deployment responsibilities are. However, these meetings did not always include participants who had been deployed, nor did they bring in voices from missions where ETs were already deployed. Instead, they drew on input from the New York–based military advisers who in turn drew on expertise from colleagues in their capitals. This led some interviewees to express concern that the process of developing the EPs' structure had not adequately taken mission dynamics and existing practices into consideration.[119] This could make it difficult to reconcile the standardized guidance on EPs with existing structures in missions that have already institutionalized ETs into their operations (like MONUSCO).

114 Richard Ledet et al., "Recognizing the Ethical Pitfalls of Female Engagement in Conflict Zones," *Journal of Military Ethics* 17, no. 4 (2018), p. 206.

115 Henigson, "Community Engagement," p. 18.

116 The author would like to thank Helen Bryan for sharing this development during her review of this policy paper.

117 Interview with mission intelligence officer, March 2021.

118 Gabrielle Cook, "Counterinsurgency and Female Engagement Teams in the War in Afghanistan," *E-International Relations*, August 16, 2015.

119 Interview with former OMA official, January 2020; interview with military trainer, December 2019; interview with officials deployed to MONUSCO, December 2020.

Documenting and Reporting on the Work of ETs

Data collection, documentation of best practices, and reporting on gendered community engagement activities are extremely limited. This prevents the UN from building its institutional knowledge of the gendered community engagement activities conducted by ETs and by missions more broadly.[120] This documentation and reporting could take place through existing systems. According to one interviewee, the "measurement of effect" is relatively easy with engagement activities, but only if this information is recorded.[121] This could be done through the UN's Situational Awareness Geospatial Enterprise (SAGE) program, which is used to gather incident data. Currently, there are no filters that can be applied to the activities of ETs that would distinguish them from other types of patrols.[122] A relatively simple change that could allow OMA to collect robust data as it refines the protocol for EPs would be to include such a designation and to distinguish which reports are coming from EPs versus regular infantry units.

The Gendered Assumptions Embedded in Engagement Teams

While thinking about the role of ETs and EPs has become more nuanced over time, certain narratives around women peacekeepers' engagement with women in host communities remain prevalent. In addition, many peacekeepers continue to ground their approach to community engagement in stereotypes about women and men in host communities. These gendered assumptions cut across all activities conducted by ETs.

Gendered Assumptions about Women Peacekeepers

Women peacekeepers deployed to ETs or EPs face two overarching assumptions that can impact their work: (1) that they are inherently better at conducting community engagement; and (2) that they require more protection than male peacekeepers.

Assumption That Women Peacekeepers Are Better at Community Engagement

There was a widespread assumption among interviewees and questionnaire respondents that women peacekeepers are more effective at conducting community engagement than their male counterparts. One interviewee said that military women in ETs "can build a relationship immediately—even if they're wearing body armor, even if they're wearing the blue helmets, even if they're a different skin color or speak a different language—because there's already an automatic barrier coming up with a man."[123] Another stated, "All battalions can fire and shoot weapons, but no one can get information from the locals the way that women can."[124] Yet another said, "The smile of a female soldier… often [gives] a more friendly image of the patrol and the troops."[125]

In some cases, these assumptions are rooted in the physical appearance of military women peacekeepers. For example, one interviewee stated that "the face of a female soldier cannot be replaced by an ugly male face" when conducting community engagement.[126] Such assumptions that a woman's appearance implies trustworthiness and will automatically make inroads with a community are inappropriate. A focus on women's appearance as integral to their operational performance detracts from their professional role on deployment and

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120 See also: Spink, "'We Have to Try to Break the Silence Somehow'"; and Henigson, "Community Engagement," p. 19.

121 Interview with former MONUSCO force gender adviser, December 2020.

122 For recent analysis and recommendations related to SAGE, see: Robert Nagel, Kate Fin, and Julia Maenza, "Gendered Impacts on Operational Effectiveness of UN Peace Operations," Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security, May 2021.

123 Interview with military officer deployed to MONUSCO, March 2021.

124 Interview with woman peacekeeper formerly deployed to MINUSCA, July 2020.

125 Interview with woman peacekeeper formerly deployed to UNIFIL, January 2020.

126 Interview with senior military official at UN headquarters, February 2021.

can contribute to them being boxed into doing stereotypical "women's tasks." Considering that women peacekeepers report high levels of harassment and abuse, even seemingly innocuous or good-natured comments that reinforce traditional ideas around femininity can contribute to their image as "woman first, soldier second."[127]

Some interviewees—both at headquarters and in missions—also perceived military men as being less equipped than military women to take up community engagement activities beyond speaking to local leaders. When asked whether men also do community engagement within MINUSCA, one interviewee answered, "The men are only ever talking to each other."[128] Another interviewee shared her perception that military men's discussions with host communities end at the "key level." She felt that her male colleagues only engaged with leaders who "just tell you what they think you want to hear," while women in the ET wanted "even a child to tell [them] what they wanted."[129]

> Assumptions that a woman's appearance implies trustworthiness and will automatically make inroads with a community are inappropriate.

These views stem in part from the assumption that women in host communities are more willing to talk to uniformed women peacekeepers than uniformed men, a statement 86 percent of respondents agreed with (including 95 percent of women; see Figure 7). Forty-four percent of respondents (including 49 percent of women) also agreed that women from host communities interact differently with uniformed women than with uniformed men (see Figure 8). In Afghanistan and Iraq, for example, US forces largely justified the use of FETs on the basis of cultural norms against women speaking with or being searched by unfamiliar men.

There are also practical reasons why most peacekeepers assume female peacekeepers will have better access to women and why some (though far fewer) assume male peacekeepers will have better access to men. This often reflects the cultural realities and individual preferences of the communities where ETs are deployed.[130] However, these assumptions can also be grounded in gendered misconceptions and essentialist thinking on the part of individual peacekeepers or mission leaders. For example, the corollary of the assumption that women in host communities may be reluctant to speak to male peacekeepers is often that they will tell women peacekeepers the information a peace operation needs. But just because military personnel share a gender identity with the community members they are speaking to does not mean they are going to be able to collect the complex information they need or to critically question the information they are given. Many factors apart from gender are significant when peacekeepers are planning their approaches to fostering relationships with host communities.

Moreover, when women peacekeepers (as members of ETs or EPs) are positioned as the solution to conducting gendered community engagement, a burden is placed on them, however unintentionally, to succeed on the merit of their gender identity rather than their professional ability. While those arguing for the deployment of more women peacekeepers as a way to shift toward a whole-of-community approach to peacekeeping have good intentions, these reasons should not be the basis for gendered community engagement.

Instead, interviewees frequently emphasized that the responsibility for community engagement should fall on all peacekeepers regardless of their gender identity. This requires acknowledging that all military personnel, whether men or women, have a gender and that all personnel must be engaged with from a gender perspective from recruitment to deployment. "Gender-equals-women" approaches to peacekeeping will only stifle progress on whole-of-community engagement. As one interviewee mentioned, such approaches require not only training military men in the skill

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127 Lotte Vermeij, "Woman First, Soldier Second: Taboos and Stigmas Facing Military Women in UN Peace Operations," International Peace Institute, October 2020.

128 Interview with woman military peacekeeper formerly deployed to MINUSCA, July 2020.

129 Interview with woman peacekeeper formerly deployed to MINUSCA, July 2020.

130 The author would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for helping to nuance this point.

Figure 7. Perceived differences between community members' willingness to speak with peacekeepers on the basis of their gender
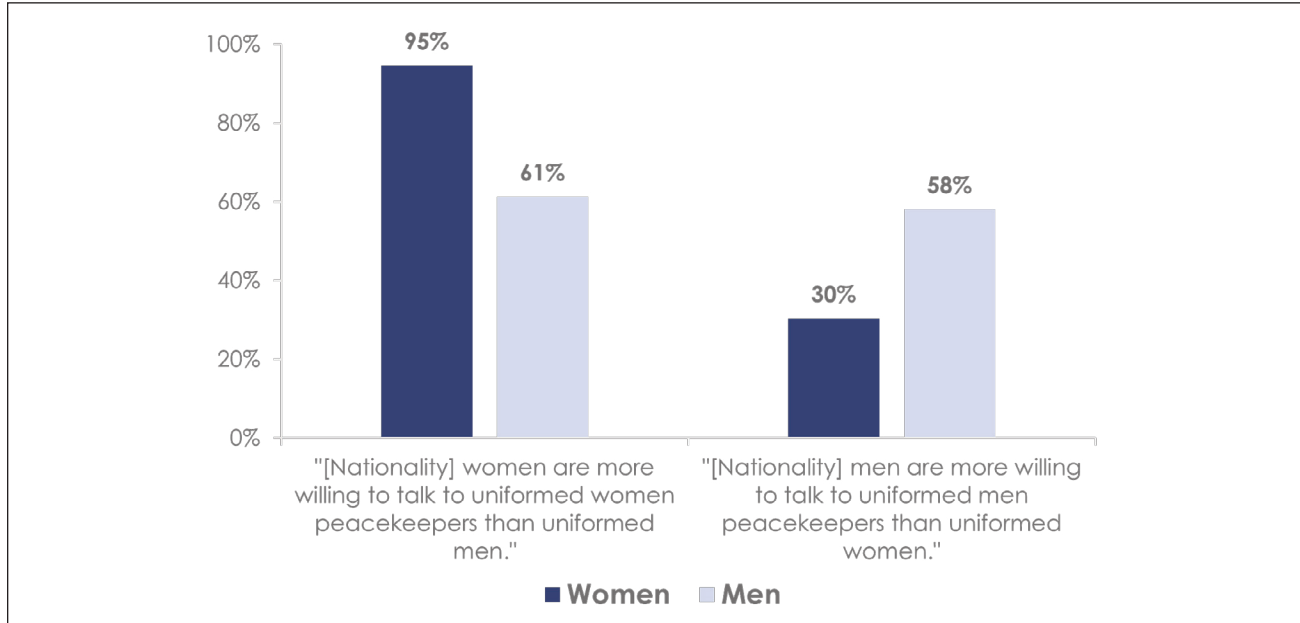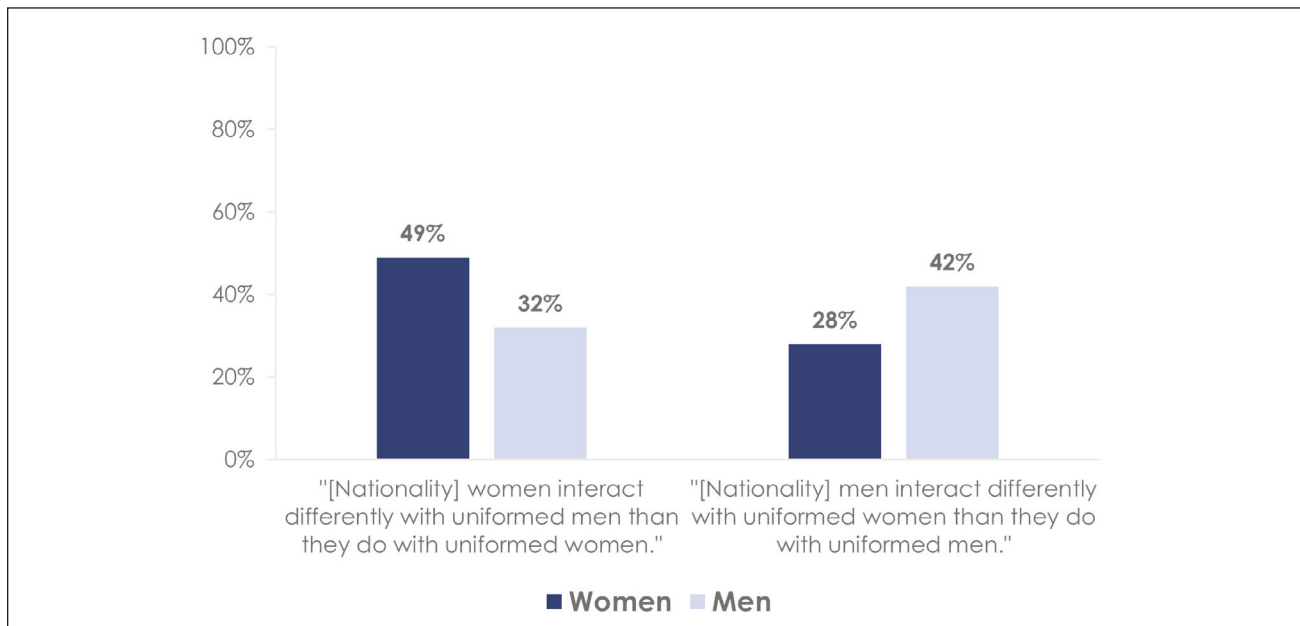

Figure 8. Perceived differences between community members' interaction with peacekeepers on the basis of their gender

sets required for community engagement but also countering individual prejudices and biases regarding women's roles and the military value of community engagement, which might impede men's participation in ETs and EPs.[131] This points back to the importance of TCCs dedicating resources to changing mindsets within their military institutions as they simultaneously focus on recruiting more women to participate in EPs.

There is also a risk that ostensibly gender-neutral guidance could be applied differently to men and women peacekeepers. For example, the EP Handbook's list of "general attitudes" that are useful for peacekeepers' cultural competency includes "smile," "dress appropriately or modestly," and "gender will nearly always be a factor."[132] Due to existing stereotypes, this guidance could be disproportionately applied to women if those conducting trainings are not careful to emphasize that it applies to all peacekeepers equally.

> Military women repeatedly expressed that requiring military men to accompany them on patrol solely for protection is belittling and disregards their military training.

Assumption That Women Peacekeepers Require Protection

Another prevalent assumption is that military women require protection from military men when on patrol.[133] Of the questionnaire respondents, 39 percent indicated that uniformed women need their male colleagues to protect them on patrol, while just 6 percent indicated that uniformed men need uniformed women to protect them (see Figure 9). This points to a difference in the ways men and women infantry members are perceived in terms of their ability to offer and their need to receive protection. Perhaps surprisingly, this difference was even more pronounced among women than among men (though the overall number of male respondents was relatively small).

Military women interviewees, most of whom were in headquarters-based or leadership roles, expressed frustration with this perception. They repeatedly expressed that requiring military men to accompany military women patrolling in host communities that might be deemed "dangerous" is belittling and disregards these women's military training. It is also not uncommon for infantry-trained women to be deployed to UN peace operations only to be base-bound in administrative roles.[134] This can keep women out of the outward-facing roles that involve speaking to civilians in host communities—including participation in foot patrols—that are of paramount importance to mission success. Military leadership at UN headquarters has pointed out that the deployment of EPs could counter this dynamic by forcing TCCs to commit to assigning women to patrols.

Multiple interviewees explicitly referenced MINUSMA, where women military peacekeepers are not permitted to go into areas deemed "too dangerous" for them despite having received the same training as their male counterparts. This happens despite civilian personnel routinely going into the same villages that military women are barred from entering (albeit with heavily armed convoys). One interviewee expressed her frustration with this, saying that at MINUSMA "they will let a military man whose job is stapling pieces of paper together grab a gun and go," but military leaders would forbid combat-trained women from doing the same.[135] Similarly, another military interviewee who worked in MINUSCA said that despite her qualifications, she was rarely allowed to leave mission headquarters. This changed when the first ET was assembled to go to the market and "make friends," but male (and sometimes female) soldiers would go along to provide protection, and the commanding officer was reportedly never comfortable letting women go out on their own.[136]

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131 Interview with military peacekeeper deployed to MONUSCO, March 2021.

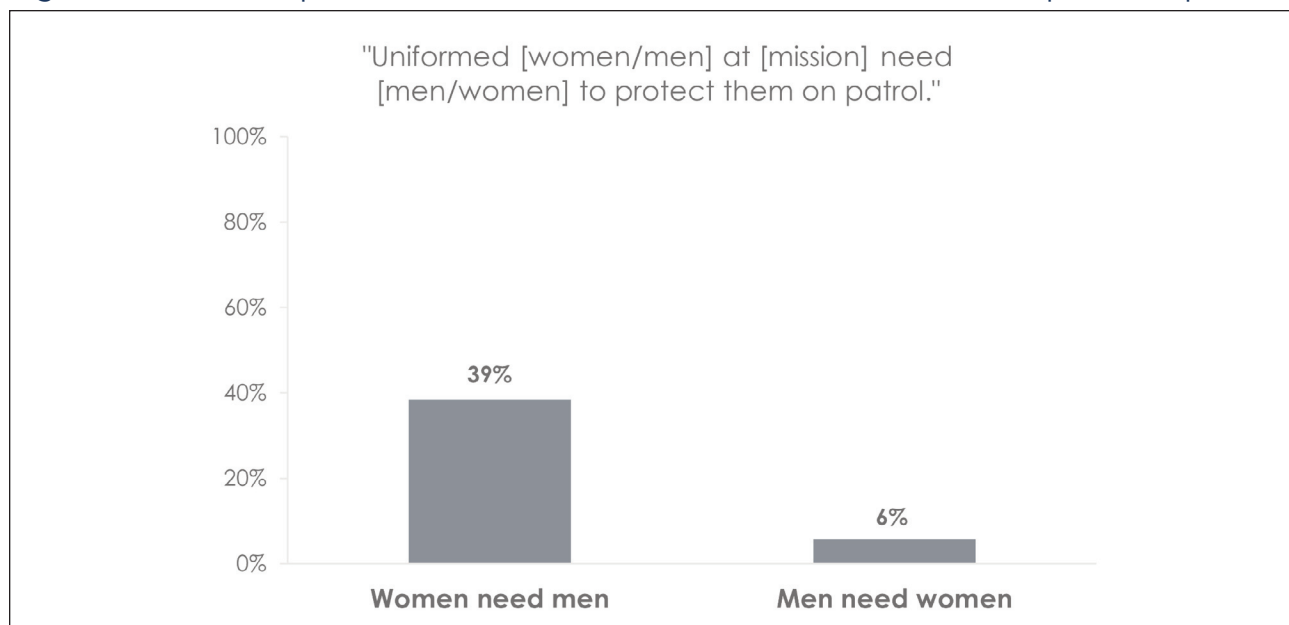132 UN DPO, "EP Handbook," pp. 41–42.

133 This assumption appeared to be more prevalent among questionnaire respondents than interviewees.

134 For more on the "gendered protection norm," see: Sabrina Karim and Kyle Beardsley, *Equal Opportunity Peacekeeping* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

135 Interview with former OMA gender adviser, November 2020.

136 Interview with woman military peacekeeper deployed to MINUSCA, July 2020.

Figure 9. Perceived protection needs of female versus male uniformed peacekeepers

"Uniformed [women/men] at [mission] need
[men/women] to protect them on patrol."

39%	
Women need men	Men need women
	6%

The increased presence of ETs and EPs in missions may (and should) counter this gendered protection norm. As TCCs commit to deploying women in community engagement and other patrol-focused roles, the perception that they need protection will likely decrease within missions. However, the burden of changing this norm should not fall on individual military women, and simply increasing numbers and visibility is not an antidote to systemic barriers, stereotypes, and discrimination within militaries.

Paradoxically, this gendered protection norm does not always extend to the threats military women peacekeepers face from their own colleagues. Lotte Vermeij's recent research shows that military women experience high rates of sexual harassment and abuse, both in their national militaries and while deployed to UN peace operations; of 142 military women interviewed from 2019 to 2020, 94 percent "experienced, witnessed, or heard about sexual harassment or assault in UN peace operations."[137] In a recent IPI survey of women peacekeepers, 38 percent of respondents reported that they experienced or witnessed sexual harassment, discrimination, or assault while on

mission.[138] Both of these data sets indicate that the push to increase women's participation in peacekeeping must happen in conjunction with concerted efforts to strengthen screening processes, control and command, and accountability for all mission personnel.

On the other hand, some have also used the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault to argue against the rapid deployment of more women. One interviewee stated his concern that there would be negative side effects of pushing too quickly for 50 percent women in EPs, predicting an increase in intra-mission sexual harassment and abuse.[139] However, this in and of itself is a gendered protection norm and again places the burden for change on women rather than on the military structures that need to change.

Gendered Assumptions and Stereotypes about Host Communities

Irrespective of the gender of the peacekeepers themselves, justifications for gendered community engagement may perpetuate harmful—and

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137 Vermeij, "Woman First, Soldier Second," infographics on pp. 32–33.
138 See: forthcoming IPI paper on sexual harassment, discrimination, and assault against women peacekeepers.
139 Interview with senior military official familiar with the EP policy-drafting process, January 2020.

sometimes racist—stereotypes about women in host communities, particularly in Africa.

Racialized Generalizations about Women in Host Communities

Some interviewees made statements about "women in Africa" or "African society" rather than specific countries or cultures where peacekeepers are working, over generalizing about the operating environment and the population the mission is meant to protect and serve. This may be the result of a lack of training and education about context, but it could also speak to underlying gender and racial biases that will be difficult to overcome.[140] Such generalizations cast doubt on the UN's ability to tailor engagement strategies to specific communities.[141] They also increase the risks faced by peacekeepers and host communities alike: generalizations and stereotypes obscure specific communities' unique protection concerns, challenges, and needs as well as context-specific threats to peacekeepers themselves.

> Engagement based on gendered assumptions flattens the politics around international military presences by leaving out the perspectives of the local communities themselves.

Other interviewees criticized the tendency to make generalizations about women in host communities, particularly in Afghanistan. When discussing the UN's use of ETs, interviewees frequently returned to the Afghanistan example and acknowledged that the United States' use of Afghan women's "plight" as one of the ways to justify invasion was deeply problematic. Several cited conversations they had with Afghan women while on deployment that pointed to a "conflict between what equality and gender equity mean to the people who are enacting the policies versus the people on the ground." One interviewee recounted how the Afghan women she spoke to rejected Western concepts of their needs. As she related it, the attitude of many women was "stop trying to get us to take our burqas off and get us some food, get us jobs, help us live. Stop using us as an excuse."[142] She saw women in Afghanistan being essentialized and treated as victims made out to be "weak, sad, pathetic, and in need of rescue."[143]

This points to a broader issue with many existing approaches to community engagement. While assistance or engagement based on gendered assumptions can be helpful for communities in the short term and may align with their needs and desires, it flattens the politics around international military presences worldwide by leaving out the perspectives of the local communities themselves (also a shortcoming of this research). In Afghanistan, for example, the perspectives of Afghan civilians have rarely—if ever—been visible in analyses of the effectiveness of FETs except as filtered through foreign military members.[144] Many UN missions also lack consistent, comprehensive, and formalized mechanisms for host-community input.[145] This can exacerbate a savior mentality that can prolong occupation or militarized interventions that are not working for host communities. It also assumes shared political values and understandings of gender as well as gender-based solidarity between women from very different contexts. This is particularly worrying when considering the colonial histories of the Western white feminist conceptions of gender that ETs are founded on.[146]

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140 Interviews with military peacekeepers and UN headquarters personnel, December 2019, January 2020, November 2020, January 2021, and February 2021.

141 Interview with senior military official at UN headquarters, February 2021; interview with military peacekeeper deployed to MONUSCO, February 2021.

142 Interview with woman in the US military, February 2021.

143 Ibid. See also: Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002); Kim Berry, "The Symbolic Use of Afghan Women in the War on Terror," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 27, no. 2 (2003); and Nancy Jabbra, "Women, Words and War: Explaining 9/11 and Justifying U.S. Military Action in Afghanistan and Iraq," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 8, no. 1 (2006).

144 Annick T. R. Wibben, "Female Engagement Teams in Afghanistan: Exploring the 'War on Terror' Narrative," in *Researching War: Feminist Methods, Ethics, and Politics*, Annick T. R. Wibben, ed. (Routledge, 2016).

145 For more on the need for input mechanisms and their operationalization, see: Nagel et al., "Gendered Impacts on Operational Effectiveness of UN Peace Operations."

146 See also: Kate Cronin-Furman, Nimmi Gowrinathan, and Rafia Zakaria, "Emissaries of Empowerment," The City College of New York, September 2017.

The Impact of Gendered Assumptions on the Training and Activities of ETs

Gendered assumptions also play into the work of ETs across several of the activities mentioned above. In responding to CRSV, for example, ETs tend to focus on CRSV against women and children rather than against the whole population. Of the question-naire respondents, 43 percent indicated that ETs respond to CRSV against women and 42 percent that they respond to CRSV against children; only 26 percent said the same about men. Most interviewees followed a similar pattern, mentioning only CRSV against women or "women and children" as a single category unless explicitly asked about CRSV against men or sexual and gender minorities. Once asked about other types of victims, interviewees typically acknowledged the importance of inclusion but indicated that UN training would be unable to quickly catch up.[147]

Likewise, ETs' analyses of broader violence and protection concerns tend to focus on women (see Figure 10). As one interviewee put it, "The greatest hurdle [is] the basic assumption that men protect and women are in need of protection."[148] As such, civilian men are often not seen as having protection needs. Another interviewee deployed to MONUSCO emphasized the challenges faced in that context because "men here are not seen as vulner-able." For example, men may not come forward to report violence, or older boys who have been recruited into armed groups may not be recognized as victims.[149] This is reflected in the questionnaires, where 58 percent of respondents (including 64 percent of women) indicated that women in host communities are more in need of protection than men; only 24 percent indicated that women and men require the same kind of protection.

Development projects or livelihood trainings, whether carried out by civilian or uniformed personnel, can also unintentionally reinforce gendered stereotypes within host communities and military forces. For example, they can reinforce the idea that military women are innately skilled in traditionally feminine livelihoods such as education or caretaking. Interviewees in MINUSCA, MONUSCO, and UNMISS, described undertaking livelihood projects that followed stereotypical gender lines such as sewing trainings for women and carpentry trainings for men. Scholars have criticized gender stereotyping in such conflict and post-conflict programming for, among other things, devaluing women's politics and desires.[150]

Gendered assumptions also play into the trainings received by peacekeepers deployed to ETs, which focus primarily on engagement with women. One trainer said that in his experience, most community engagement training is focused on CRSV and on "gender as a women's issue."[151] Indeed, most interviewees spoke of gendered engagement as though women's engagement requires special training but engagement with men does not. This perception could be linked to the focus of trainings on responding to CRSV and the perception that victims of CRSV are overwhelm-ingly women. It may also result from the over-arching misconception that gender equates with women's issues, ignoring the gendered experiences of the population as a whole. While it is essential that women-specific and children-specific engage-ment trainings exist to emphasize the needs of these identity groups, it is unproductive to tell peacekeepers that they must engage with everyone while only providing training on how to engage with certain people.

Considering that most troops deployed to ETs or EPs are from Africa and Asia, one interviewee also noted the importance of ensuring that trainings adopt a culturally sensitive approach: "It needs to have more of a non-Western idea behind it. A lot of countries are turned off when they find out [something] is coming from a Western perspec-tive."[152] This can particularly be a problem with

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147 Interview with peacekeeping trainer/gender expert, February 2021; interview with GPOI trainers, January 2021; interview with former MONUSCO force gender adviser, December 2019; interview with peacekeeper deployed to UNIFIL, January 2020; interview with peacekeeper deployed to MINUSCA, July 2020.

148 Interview with former OMA gender adviser, November 2020.

149 Interview with military officer deployed to MONUSCO, March 2021.

150 Cronin-Furman et al., "Emissaries of Empowerment."

151 Interview with GPOI personnel, January 2021.

152 Interview with intelligence official, March 2021.

Figure 10. Perceived protection needs of women versus men in host communities

"Women in [host-country] communities require [equal/more] levels of protection compared to men."
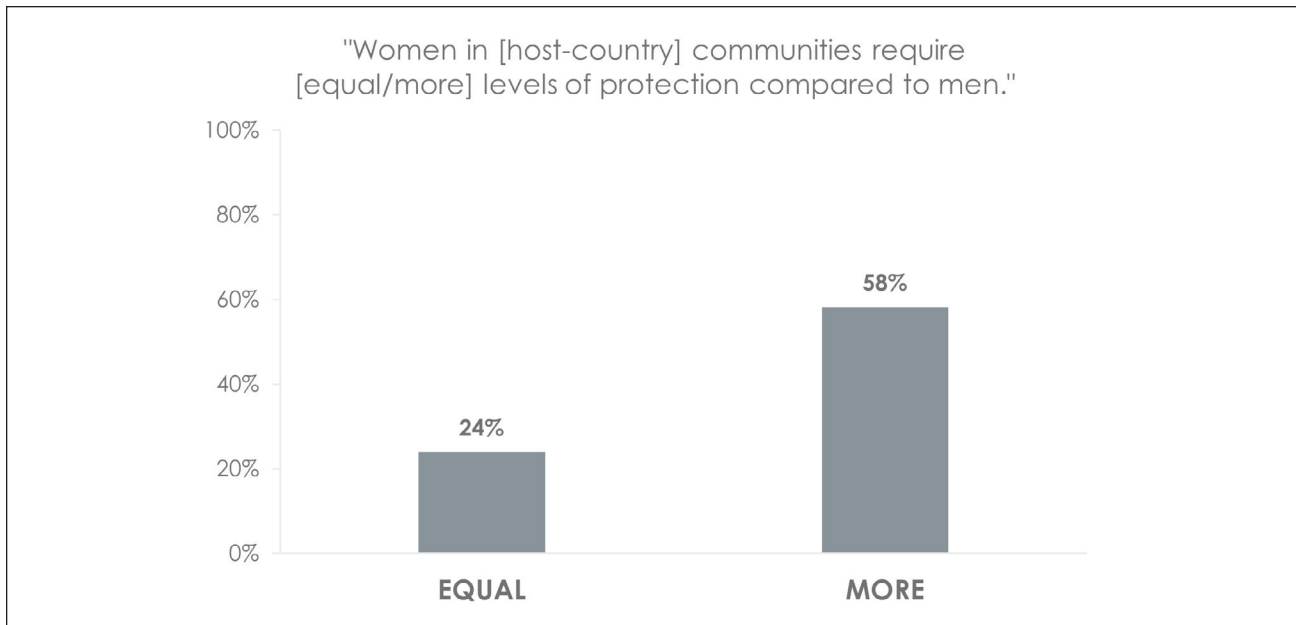
gender work: there are no universal gender roles or definitions, even though patriarchal norms tend to be the primary source of gendered subjugation globally. Indeed, prior colonization of many countries that now have a UN presence played a significant role in neutralizing once-expansive understandings of gender and sexuality.[153] This further emphasizes why consultation with host communities is essential to the UN's gendered interventions. Without considering context-specific gendered realities, these interventions risk coming across as imposing Western or neocolonial ideas onto host communities.

Despite the challenges presented by these gendered assumptions, there is little to no talk of shifting the gender-essentialist ways the UN considers both peacekeepers and host communities. Women alone are still usually the focus of discussions on gender. For example, there is no concrete guidance specific to engaging with local men or laying out men's gendered protection concerns and needs. Some missions do collect gender-disaggregated data, such as UNMISS's quarterly civilian-casualty reporting, but this data is rarely accompanied by a

gendered analysis. In most settings, men's experiences are a baseline against which everyone else's lives are measured rather than being considered along a spectrum of lived gendered realities. This risks ignoring men's protection needs, the presence of sexual and gender minorities in host communities, differences between the protection needs of women, men, girls, and boys as distinct interest groups, violent action by women, and women's political leanings that do not align with the objectives of the UN.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The UN's ongoing effort to institutionalize mixed-gender engagement platoons will align policies at headquarters with steps peacekeeping operations are already taking to better integrate gender-responsive practices into military peacekeeping. Overall, interviewees and questionnaire respondents affirmed the direction OMA is heading: they believe that mixed-gender teams and platoons are likely to be more effective than single-gender teams

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153 See, for example: Maria Lugones, "The Coloniality of Gender," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender and Development*, Wendy Harcourt, ed. (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016); Niara Sudarkasa, "'The Status of Women' in Indigenous African Societies," *Feminist Studies* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1986); Partha Chatterjee, "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India," *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (November 1989); "Landscaping Sexualities," in *Sexuality, Health and Human Rights*, Sonia Correa, Rosalind Petchesky, and Richard Parker, eds. (Routledge, 2008); and Cronin-Furman et al., "Emissaries of Empowerment."

in most settings.

Even for TCCs that are already deploying ETs, it will take time to transition to mixed-gender EPs. During this transition, OMA, missions, and TCCs must pay attention to and record the ongoing activities of existing ETs. If it looks like this new approach is not working, they should consider pivoting. Patience will be essential.

While the basic structure is the same, UN officials should also be cautious about basing the underlying assumptions and goals of the UN's gendered-engagement strategies on the US FETs used during the military occupation of Afghanistan. EPs should be used as a tool to implement mission mandates including the mandate to protect civilians, not just to mitigate harm.

To effectively implement EPs, leaders in missions and in national militaries must address the institutional barriers that not only preclude women's full participation in peace operations but also perpetuate gendered stereotypes and often put women peacekeepers in physical danger.[154] "The main problem," according to one interviewee, "is that [ETs] don't address the root problems [of] gender bias, which [are] inherent within both your own military organization and the culture you're working in."[155] Tactics like EPs can only be one part of a larger effort to achieve gender equity across the board, from TCCs' military recruitment processes to peacekeepers' post-deployment experiences. This will, in many cases, require disrupting age-old organizational cultures and enforcing policies that create a level playing field for all uniformed personnel regardless of gender.

The following are recommendations for TCCs, UN missions, and UN headquarters to improve the gendered engagement efforts of both ETs and EPs.

> "The main problem is that [engagement teams] don't address the root problems [of] gender bias… within both your own military organization and the culture you're working in."

Provide training on the skills required for community engagement for men and women across all levels of the military

TCCs, in collaboration with OMA, should provide specialized pre-deployment training to all men and women who will be assigned to ETs or EPs. Deploying an untrained soldier to an ET or EP puts every peacekeeper who patrols or otherwise works with that person at risk. Deploying an untrained woman can also contribute to harmful stereotypes that women peacekeepers are less qualified than their male counterparts. With OMA now providing guidance for such training through the UNIBAM and Engagement Platoons Handbook, TCCs need only be open to implementing it.

Training should be delivered to all military components in missions, not just to members of ETs and EPs. Contingent and battalion commanders also require training on the benefits of community engagement and on how they can best use these tools to implement mission mandates. If there is no buy-in from senior military leaders on the benefits of community engagement and the use of EPs, they will be set up to fail.

In addition, training should cover the particular engagement needs not only of women in the host community but also of men, boys, girls, and gender and sexual minorities. This requires going beyond listing all of these groups as potential categories of victims or including them as an afterthought; instead, it requires providing training on how to assess and report on their particular, complex needs. For example, trainers should recognize that people of all genders experience sexual violence and should equip all peacekeepers, regardless of their gender, to receive reports of CRSV while patrolling. Ultimately, trainings should be grounded in the understanding that all people—both in host communities and in the UN contingents engaging

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154 See: Sabrina Karim et al., "Measuring Opportunities for Women In Peace Operations," Elsie Initiative for Women in Peacekeeping, August 20, 2019; and Vermeij, "Woman First, Soldier Second."

155 Interview with member of the US military, February 2021.

with those communities—have gendered experiences, not just women.

Shift the burden for gendered community engagement off of women

Trainings both for members of ETs and EPs and for mission leaders should counter the idea that the skills and knowledge required to conduct community engagement are "feminine" or that gendered community engagement is "women's work." Instead, they should present community engagement as a critical force enabler. Trainers must also ensure that gendered stereotypes do not seep into guidance on how military men and women in ETs and EPs should behave. This requires mainstreaming gender in all trainings (not just "gender trainings"), from the writing and review of training materials to implementation.

Likewise, women peacekeepers should not be pigeonholed into ETs and EPs. Instating a requirement for gender-balanced EPs could result in women being pulled out of "regular platoons" where their integration is equally important. Contingent and battalion commanders should assign women to roles on the basis of their skills and knowledge, not on the basis of their gender, including to frontline roles.

> Trainings should counter the idea that the skills and knowledge required to conduct community engagement are "feminine" or that gendered community engagement is "women's work."

This will be an important consideration during OMA's rollout of EPs and its campaign for TCCs to adopt the training and handbook guidance early on. From the earliest days of their conception, EPs have been touted as, among other things, a means to increase the number of women deploying to peace operations. While true, making this a central rationale for creating EPs undermines the notion that all peacekeepers have a responsibility to respond to the needs of a host country, regardless of gender. Even when the UN has reached its gender-parity goals, community engagement will remain of paramount importance. Messaging around the OMA rollout should therefore focus on the reasons laid out in this research that training both men and women to be effective, equal

members of EPs is central to achieving the goals of people-centered peacekeeping.

Improve internal reporting and analysis by ETs and EPs

Robust reporting will be essential for the effective rollout and use of EPs. While some TCCs are already deploying EPs, and many have already deployed ETs, OMA does not have data on which TCCs are deploying which types of community engagement units. In the short and medium terms, it is critical that the UN institutionalize reporting on the ETs already in use. In the long term, the UN will need to rigorously and systematically track and report on the activities of EPs to ensure they do not suffer from the same information black hole as ETs. To this end, missions should regularly report to OMA on the activities of ETs and EPs, including emerging best practices. OMA could also compile an annual report identifying good practices from across missions.

Improved reporting could improve handovers between ET and EP commanders and members. ET commanders should have access to reporting from their predecessors when they arrive to a mission to ensure operational continuity and to avoid duplication of previous efforts. Missions should also implement systems for retaining institutional knowledge and community contacts as MONUSCO has begun doing. More broadly, good reporting and documentation can help the UN resolve the cyclical debate over whether to use all-women or mixed-gender ETs by determining the positive and negative effects of each. For now, the broad claims about both approaches are not grounded in enough evidence to base policies on.

Importantly, the UNIBAM states that "pertinent EP reports should be shared with Women's Protection Advisers and the Senior Protection of Civilians Adviser" and that ET reports should go to Joint Operations Centres and Joint Mission Analysis Centres "when relevant."[156] This is a clear improvement in reporting requirements. However, pertinence and relevance are subjective concepts

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156 UN DPO, "UNIBAM: Second Edition," p. 68.

that are dependent on decision makers to interpret. Without more systematic guidance, the default assumption should be that all reports from ETs and EPs should be shared with these mission components.

Coordinate between ETs and EPs and other mission components

ETs and EPs must not be siloed into the military components of UN missions. Relevant civilian sections and personnel (e.g., child protection advisers, women's protection advisers, DDR units, civilian gender advisers) should be involved in the onboarding of ETs and EPs to sensitize them to their work and discuss how it relates to and could benefit from military community engagement activities. Additionally, ETs and EPs should share their reports not only upward with their commanders and force gender advisers but also laterally with relevant police and civilian sections, especially the gender affairs unit.

Coordination is especially important with those engaged in peacekeeping-intelligence. Given that ETs—and, soon enough, EPs—are so frequently named as an essential information-gathering tool, their connections to military peacekeeping-intelligence at force, sector, and battalion headquarters must be refined and institutionalized. This requires ensuring that ET and EP commanders and gender focal points are not only reporting to their own battalion but also to the force gender adviser, who can then refer them to the relevant peacekeeping-intelligence structures.

Improved coordination with other mission components could also help clarify boundaries around the role of ETs and EPs. While interviewees reported a number of positive experiences undertaking quick-impact projects with a development or humanitarian angle, such interventions can blur the lines between military peacekeeping and the activities of civilian actors. After all, military personnel are not deployed to build schools, teach classes, or provide food, water, and shelter. By coordinating with missions' civilian components and other civilian actors, ETs and EPs

could help address some of these community concerns without militarizing humanitarian or development activities.

Build the capacity of missions to engage with communities

More generally, and beyond the activities of ETs and EPs, missions require more capacity to conduct community engagement and gender analysis. If the UN is taking women's participation in military components and gender-responsive peacekeeping seriously, force gender advisers must be given a staff so that they have the capacity to facilitate the flow of information from ET and EP commanders to other mission components. Missions should also systematically recruit and train community liaison assistants and interpreters of all genders, with a particular focus on increasing the number of women recruited to these positions to assist troops in community engagement activities.

With this added capacity, missions should also engage with communities as an integral part of the planning process. As it tests EPs as a tactical unit going forward, the UN should consider and integrate host-community perspectives into its operational planning.

Avoid reinforcing gendered assumptions and stereotypes through the activities of ETs and EPs

The activities of ETs and EPs often rely on gendered stereotypes (e.g., giving sewing classes to women in places where men are also culturally accepted as tailors). These stereotypes can be harmful in that they reduce both uniformed women peacekeepers and women in host communities to their gender identity and continue to equate the concept of gender with women. Through increased consultation with host communities and more consistent handovers to better maintain relationships with community members, ETs and EPs can ensure that their community engagement is based on the real, communicated needs of all community members rather than unfounded assumptions.

Annex: Demographics of Questionnaire Respondents

Table 3. Gender and mission of questionnaire respondents

	UNMISS	MINUSCA	MINUSMA	MONUSCO	TOTAL	% of Questionnaire Respondents
Female	20	27	14	87	**148**	77.1%
Male	0	16	15	0	**31**	16.1%
Not Specified	3	0	0	10	**13**	6.8%
TOTAL	**23**	**43**	**29**	**97**	192	**100.0%**
% of Questionnaire Respondents	12.0%	22.4%	15.1%	50.5%	**100.0%**	

Figure 11. National origin of questionnaire respondents[157]

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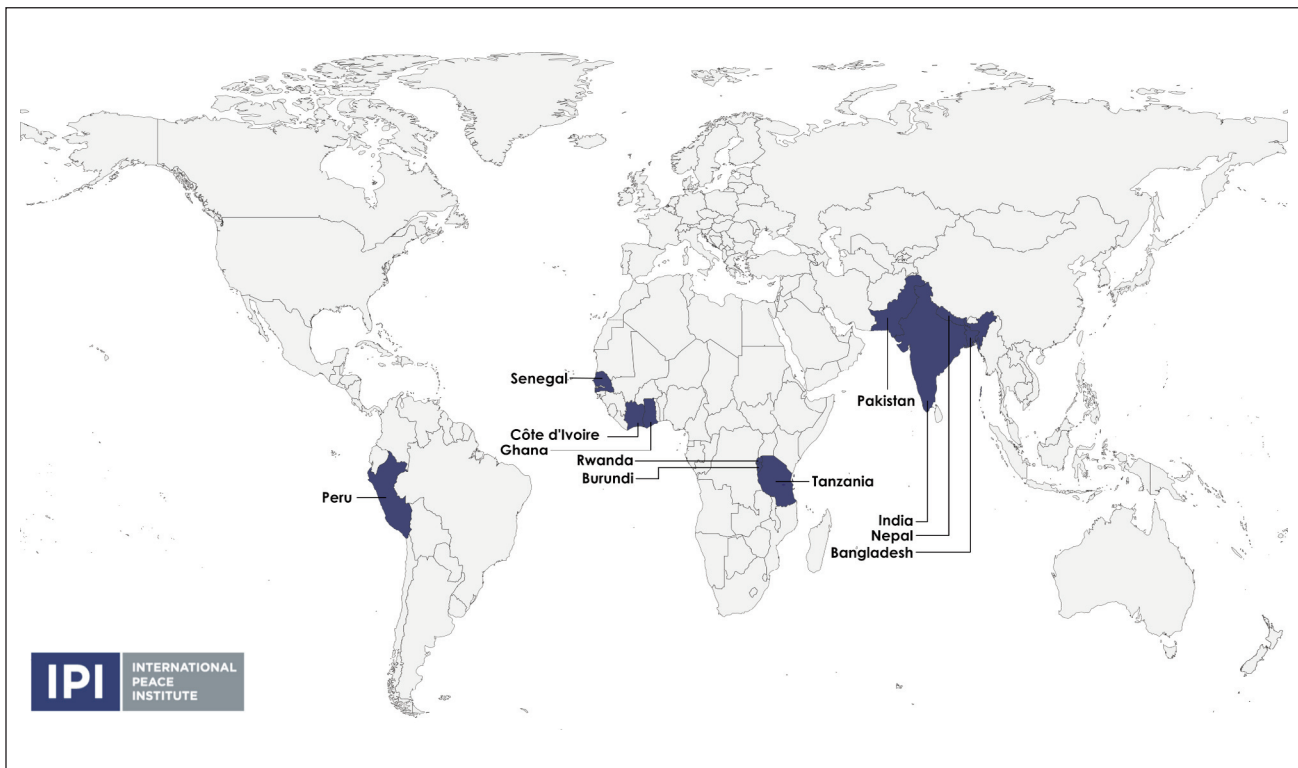
157 Despite interviews indicating that Zambia has used ETs at MINUSCA for several years, no peacekeepers from Zambia returned questionnaires from any mission.
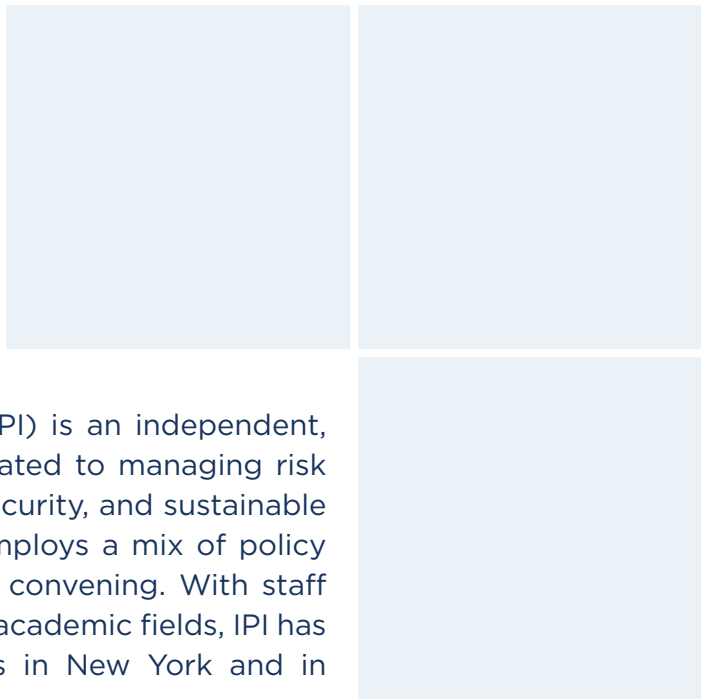
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