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## RESEARCH PAPER

### Role of Pakistani Female Peacekeepers in Enhancing International Humanitarian Law: Opportunities and Challenges

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## ROLE OF PAKISTANI FEMALE PEACEKEEPERS IN ENHANCING INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Salma Malik, Ahmed Hasan Awan and Talha Ibrahim\*

### Abstract

*In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the effectiveness of an all-gender-inclusive approach to peacekeeping missions in conflict zones, as highlighted in the UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. UN has acknowledged the importance of female peacekeepers as potential role models for girls in male-dominated societies and has taken steps to increase their numbers. Pakistan has been a significant contributor to UN Peacekeeping missions over the past six decades and has also achieved the target of deploying female soldiers in its contingent forces. This study uses qualitative methods, primarily focus group discussions, to evaluate the constructive impact of UN female peacekeepers and their potential to enhance passive compliance towards International Humanitarian Law in conflict zones. It also explores whether female peacekeepers make a unique contribution and investigates the existing gap in research on their performance and the challenges they face in the field. The study highlights the need for further research and support to address the social and cultural factors that continue to restrict the contribution of female peacekeepers, particularly from countries like Pakistan, where women face significant challenges in the security sector.*

**Keywords:** International Humanitarian Law, Peacekeepers, Peace Support Operations, Gender Theory, UNSCR 1325.

### Introduction

*Pakistan is a leader in championing women peacekeepers and an example for other troop contributors.*

(Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary General<sup>1</sup>)

**I**nternational conflict has been a constant feature of human society and has led to the development of various institutional mechanisms to minimise its impact on human life. One such mechanism involves the use of international law, specifically international humanitarian law (IHL), which is applied in scenarios of active conflict. The UN is an instrument for applying IHL in conflict zones worldwide, mainly through its Peacekeeping Operations (PKO).

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As witnessed often, women and children are the primary victims of conflict and face personal and structural insecurities, including sexual harassment and abuse. The Rwandan civil war (1990-94)<sup>2</sup> and the eight-year Yemeni conflict<sup>3</sup> are stark reminders of such heinous acts. Women peacekeepers can play a positive role in minimising such occurrences and allowing victims to be more vocal, thereby leading to justice for the victims. Pakistan has been a significant contributor to UN Peacekeeping missions and has successfully met its target of deploying female soldiers in its contingent forces. These female soldiers, many of whom are Muslim, bring a unique cultural sensitivity to UN missions located in or serving Muslim populations.

The role of Muslim women in combat has often been misconstrued in the wars of early Islam. Illustrious names such as those of Umm-e-Umara, Umm Sulaym, Safiya bint-e-Abdul Mutlab and later Umm-e-Hakim, Jawariya bint-e-Abi Sufiyan, and Hind bint-e-Utbah, are amongst a select few who played an important role on the battlefield.<sup>4</sup> Even during the *Ghazwas*, women routinely accompanied their men to the battlefield, partook in service and logistical roles, and bore credible witnesses (*Shahadat*) in these wars. With the permission of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), they tended to the wounded, thus indicating the permissibility of women to nurse foreign patients.<sup>5</sup> The entire household of Imam Hussain accompanied him to Karbala — the army of 80 people included the honourable women and minor children, amongst whom many embraced martyrdoms.<sup>6</sup> However, not only are women in combat considered an anomaly, but the role and contribution of female peacekeepers often need to be recognised. There remain significant gaps and challenges faced by female peacekeepers, especially from countries such as Pakistan, where women face numerous challenges in the security domain, and their contribution remains restricted to UN peace missions due to social and cultural factors.

This study evaluates the constructive impact of UN female peacekeepers in conflict zones and their potential to enhance passive compliance towards IHL. It employs a gender theory framework to understand the argument better. Gender theory highlights how gendered thinking influences human actions and ideas, shedding light on socially constructed images of what women and men can and cannot do based on idealised masculine and feminine values. The study aims to answer questions such as whether females contribute uniquely to peacekeeping, what operational and military factors inhibit female peacekeepers from using their potential, and how to infuse a more gendered approach to peacekeeping under UNSC Resolution 1325. The paper's qualitative methodology focuses on achieving a meaning-centred understanding of the topic. It employs focus group discussions (FGDs) and data analysis of existing literature. The participants of FGDs were experts from related fields of IHL and Peacekeeping.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the data, the study adopted a flexible and reflective approach in its analysis. Participants were selected based on personnel privy to the deployment and operational matters to gain maximum information and data regarding Pakistan's contribution and challenges. The study based on FGDs

highlights the experience and perspective of Pakistani female peacekeepers at the UN, explicitly focusing on their contributions, challenges faced, and potential for enhancing compliance with IHL. FGDs were conducted in a non-participant or more artificial setting to facilitate open and candid discussion. The data collected through FGDs and literature review has been analysed using a thematic analysis approach. The themes that emerge from the data have been used to understand the research questions comprehensively. It helped identify the operational and military factors that inhibit female peacekeepers from using their potential where they are deployed. Recommendations were then suggested on infusing a more gendered approach to peacekeeping in accordance with UNSC Resolution 1325.

### Why Women?

As Lise Howard<sup>7</sup> points out, there are three primary forms or approaches to power in PKO. Firstly, the use of coercive means, where the emphasis is on the use of force. Secondly, the use of inducement strategies based on material incentives. Last but most importantly, persuasion, which can only be achieved successfully through a higher moral ground. Howard goes on to establish that on occasions in the recent past where UN Peacekeeping missions have been completed, the conflict has not yet broken out to date, primarily because in those cases,<sup>8</sup> particularly in Namibia, the UN mission relied heavily on persuasion as a means of power.<sup>9</sup> In light of the above and the context of the study, this leads us to the question that, when it comes to the negotiating table, are women persuasive? If yes, then why aren't they visible enough?

Manal Omar<sup>10</sup> narrates that it was a woman who was ultimately able to negotiate a ceasefire between opposition militias and the people of Bani Walid (Moammar Gadhafi's hometown) when no other dared to. Women have and continue to play a crucial role in many male-dominated societies with much success, she argues, as was the case in the Arab Spring as well. She highlights that bringing women into peace and conflict is no favour; instead, it is required to address modern-day conflict. Various studies from the UN and others have shown that when women are involved in any peace process or a negotiating table, it is more likely to be sustainable for up to two years by 20% and up to 15 years by 35%. Unfortunately, despite this, less than 4% of signatures for peace agreements are women, and less than 10% of negotiators are women.<sup>11</sup> Over the years, the need to incorporate an all-gender-exclusive approach to peacekeeping missions in different conflict zones has surfaced as a critical driver of their effectiveness. Recognising the relevance of women in peace negotiations, peacekeeping and post-conflict reconstruction, landmark Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) was passed in 2000 by the UNSC.

As the discourse on gender studies further develops, the notion that women's distinctive and significant role in enhancing the effectiveness of peacekeeping missions is being fully recognised. Furthermore, as per UN assessments, female peacekeepers can perform the same tasks as their male peers with equal proficiency, even in challenging situations. By bonding with women from affected local

communities, female peacekeepers have often gathered their confidence, gaining access to information and becoming a dependable source of reliable human intelligence far better than their male colleagues, particularly in conservative societies. Such ingress remains critical to the success of a PKO. In such settings, female security officials often manage to get access to areas that are unavailable to men. The intelligence about potential security risks or threats to PKO is highly critical to the success or sustainability of a given peace operation.<sup>12</sup>

Through empathy and outreach, female peacekeepers build connections with women and vulnerable communities at a much-personalised level and can therefore address problems closer to these affected population groups. Given the cultural sensitivities, women from the affected population are usually more vocal and comfortable discussing gender-based violence or issues related to their health care and trauma faced by female officers, irrespective of whether they belong to police, military, or peacekeeping personnel.<sup>13</sup> Such a role by female peacekeepers also ensures a successful and sustainable conflict resolution. Multiple studies suggest that compared to men, an empathetic, restrained and less aggressive role by women serving in the police force makes them more adept at reducing tensions.<sup>14</sup> It further strengthens and aligns with IHL, which is concerned with the appropriate use of force in conflicts. Female peacekeepers have also been instrumental in cultivating trust between host institutions and the communities they serve. In addition to promoting stability and establishing the rule of law, this helps immensely in the post-conflict rehabilitative phase. Women's participation in the security sector is linked to decreased misconduct complaints and improved citizens' perception of UN forces.<sup>15</sup>

Post-conflict analysis of affected societies also brings forth the notion that women and girls in host societies have become empowered and participate as active stakeholders due to the presence of female peacekeepers. Furthermore, this empowerment has increased female recruitment in local police and military forces.<sup>16</sup> However, the percentage of female enrollment in peacekeeping still needs to catch up to the 20% target the UN gave.<sup>17</sup> Aiming to achieve greater gender parity in the peacekeeping contingents, UNSCR 2242 pushed for an increase in the participation of female peacekeepers by doubling the number of military and police contingents over five years. As a result, following the adoption of the resolution, the proportion of female peacekeepers in UN Peacekeeping missions has experienced an upward trend from 4.1% to 5.6%. The most significant hike has been observed among female military and staff observers, whose presence has increased from 4.7% to 14.2%.<sup>18</sup>

The Secretary-General office of the UN has taken a keen interest in promoting and implementing the WPS agenda, recognising its importance more than ever. In 2018 the Secretary General put forward six key gap areas for advancing the agenda. Those areas included ensuring women are decision-makers in economic recovery processes, protecting women rights defenders and civil society in conflict situations, boosting funding for WPS, putting more women in uniform in UN police and UNPKO,

guaranteeing women's meaningful participation in peace processes and generating and make available more data, evidence and analysis on women, conflict and peace.<sup>19</sup>

On the International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers on May 29, 2020, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres highlighted the 20th anniversary of WPS UNSCR 1325. The Secretary General acknowledged that women have a right to be part of the peace process at all levels and stages, including peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding. He further reiterated that women play an essential role in UNPKO, allowing for better access and communication with local communities and reducing the frequency of conflict and confrontation. UN female peacekeepers serve as role models for their peers and inspire local girls and women. Moreover, female peacekeepers improve the efficiency of operations in all aspects by building trust among the communities they serve, especially those who require protection. The Secretary General reaffirmed that increasing women in peacekeeping is essential at all levels, including decision-making.<sup>20</sup> Female peacekeepers ensure the safety of civilians and prevent sexual violence and abuse, which are also crucial objectives of the IHL regime.

### **Applicability of IHL to UN Peace Support Operations**

IHL, also called the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC), is a specific domain of public international law that governs the behaviour of parties engaged in armed conflicts. Its main goal and purpose is to limit the impact of armed conflicts and safeguard individuals, both in the civilian and military domain, whether they are wounded or active. To mitigate the effects of war, belligerent states and other armed groups involved in the conflict must adhere to certain legal boundaries while waging war. IHL thereby aims to balance two fundamental principles – that of humanity and the principle of military necessity. These principles underlie the entire body of law and are inherent in most detailed rules derived from Geneva Conventions or Hague regulations.<sup>21</sup>

These principles encompass distinction, proportionality, precautions and prohibition of unnecessary suffering. IHL further branches off into two sets of laws, one being the Hague law and the second Geneva law. Hague law limits means and methods of warfare, including restrictions on using certain weapons in armed conflict to minimise the effect of hostilities. Whereas Geneva laws, commonly known as the Law Governing Protected Persons in armed conflict, apply to civilians and military personnel who were either non-combatants, non-participatory or no longer directly involved in hostilities. A common misconception prevails that only IHL applies to armed conflict as the sole legal framework, which needs to be addressed. The International Human Rights Law (IHRL) applies in peacetime and remains applicable during wartime to an extent. While there are similarities between IHL and IHRL, they have distinct origins and scopes of application.

The UN has increasingly relied on peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations to address conflicts, but allegations of IHL abuses have marred these

efforts.<sup>22</sup> Despite this, the UN has yet to establish a clear framework for enforcing the law of war within its forces and fully comply with IHL objectives in line with its Charter. UN Peace Support Operations (PSO) encompass conflict prevention, peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding<sup>23</sup> and are authorised under Chapter VI of the UN Charter. These operations adhere to the doctrinal rules of impartiality, consent of parties, and non-use of force except in self-defence or defence of the mandate. In contrast, UN peace enforcement operations involve a forcible military intervention by one or more states in a third country to restore peace and security and end a violent conflict. These forces are authorised under Chapter VII of the UN Charter and allowed to use force to establish peace and order. In practice, however, UN operations often blur the line between these two categories due to the fluid nature of the conflict.<sup>24</sup> Establishing the applicability of IHL on UNPKO and determining what branch of IHL applies to UN forces, the organisation must develop a mechanism to suppress such violations, which remains a challenge to date.<sup>25</sup> In hindsight, under its WPS agenda, the UN has since recruited females at all levels of its peace operations to address such violations.<sup>26</sup> It highlights and, therefore, can be argued that women can play a positive role in ensuring UNPKO compliance with IHL.

### **Pakistan's Contribution to UN Peacekeeping Operations**

Pakistan is among the top five contributors of troops to UNPKO, having deployed around 200,000 troops worldwide over the past six decades. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the country has also achieved the target of contributing contingent forces that comprise 15% of female soldiers. The induction of female peacekeepers by the Pakistan Army started in 2017,<sup>27</sup> and by now, 450 female Pakistani soldiers have served in different PKOs around the world. Pakistan's two Female Engagement Teams (FET) serve in the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Several civilian Pakistani women also serve in UN Peacekeeping missions as volunteers.

Shehzadi Gulfam from the police service, serving as deputy superintendent police, was the first Pakistani female to be deployed in the UN Mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1997, and subsequently served in UN Missions in Kosovo (1999) and Timor-Leste in 2007. In her fourth UN peacekeeping engagement, Gulfam was redeployed in 2010 in the United Nations Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT) as the team leader for the UN Police (UNPOL) in the Timor-Leste National Police (PNTL) Vulnerable Persons Unit (VPU). In 2011, she was awarded the International Female Police Peacekeeper Award by the UN Police Division in the Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions (OROLSI), the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), and the International Association of Women Police (IAWP). Recognition and appreciation such as these have led to the regularisation and increased induction of Policewomen and civilians from Pakistan in peacekeeping missions.

The Pakistani FET in the UN Stabilisation Mission in Congo (MONUSCO) was also awarded the UN medal for their services, leading to global applause and

recognition. Pakistani female officers perform wide-ranging duties as psychologists, FETs to information technology (IT), media, public relations officers, vocational officers, gender advisors and medical professionals, and responsibilities in operations, logistics and informational branches. Several civilian Pakistani women also serve in UN Peacekeeping missions as volunteers. It is significant for promoting and applying IHL in its true sense and spirit. Pakistani female UN peacekeepers present a unique opportunity where most of them belonging to the Islamic faith naturally understand many cultural sensitivities. It becomes even more important since many UN missions are located in or have segments of the population who are Muslim. Many UN Peacekeeping missions become stalled or cannot finish because of the need to understand local customs and traditions. Moreover, the UN aims to increase the number of female peacekeepers and has acknowledged that female peacekeepers act as potential role models for women and girls in often male-dominated societies.

Pakistan's armed forces, therefore, remain committed to the UNSC's call and aim to double the number of women in uniformed peace operations by 2028. Pakistan's contribution to female peacekeepers stands at 17%, surpassing the required 15% deployment goal set by the UN. The first Pakistani FET was deployed in South Kivu, Congo, in June 2019 and was awarded for its performance, as mentioned above. This initial team of 15 female peacekeepers, the recipient of the UN medals, was later joined by 17 female officers in February 2020.

For UN Peacekeepers, the year 2020 brought an additional challenge in the shape of the Covid-19 pandemic, and female peacekeepers remained actively involved in assisting governments and local communities as frontline responders and response teams in implementing the mission mandates while taking all precautionary measures. Not only have female peacekeepers' presence and participation in key missions enhanced operational performance, but it has also further helped in positive perception building through effective media management, greater access to communities, motivating and sensitising women from local communities, they have promoted human rights, built awareness against women and child abuse and violence.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, for any conflict-ridden society to have sustainable peace, women need to be made an integral part of the process, an aspect which is often ignored and deliberately overlooked. According to the UN Action for Peacekeeping (A4P), Pakistani female peacekeepers also support and assist women in local peace processes, making peacekeeping sustainable, more effective, gender-responsive and inclusive.

The deployment of female peacekeepers also helps them gain in-depth knowledge about different cultures and exposes them to difficulties fellow women and children face during the conflict. Documenting her experience in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Samia Baig states, "Some writers may sanitise grotesque nature of crimes a human being can inflict on another as collateral damage, but we saw in high plateau how women and children suffer when infighting ensues.... We stood true to our mandate, the protection of civilians. [We] watched silently as we faced



bureaucratic hurdles when we decided to extend our help in a medical capacity. There was little we could do publicly, but we contributed as much we could do privately.”<sup>29</sup>

## **Focus Group Discussions**

FGDs were organised with a cross-section of stakeholders, including academicians, peacekeepers, IHL experts and practitioners, trainers, government officials, and civil society representatives who could lend expert opinions on the contribution of women to UNPKO. One respondent representing a prominent law firm provided some insightful legal perspectives. Acknowledging that the Geneva Conventions of 1949 did not mention women's rights, significant progress has been made in establishing a women's rights regime since then. However, interpreting these rights is context-dependent and varies based on state practice. He emphasised that women should be treated the same as men, as highlighted in the third Geneva Convention commentary by ICRC of Art. 13. In terms of the treatment of women prisoners of war, Art. 14 states that women shall be treated favourably based on privacy, healthcare and safety, and require specific facilities such as separate dormitories, as outlined in Art. 25.4. While the 1949 Conventions did not comprehensively lay down women's detention rights, state practice comes into play.

Regarding the contribution of female peacekeepers, the respondent cited the UNPK department's May 2019 statistics, which indicated that Pakistan's contribution stood at 0.7%. However, he acknowledged a lack of clarity regarding this statistic. He agreed with the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) Plus point, which offers states bonuses when they send troops to risk areas. He suggested that financial incentives increase the number of female peacekeepers and enhance the composition of the peacekeeping force. He also highlighted that readiness assessments of PKOs require non-combatant roles of women to aid women prisoners or otherwise, as these obligations fall under the IHRL and IHL and must be fulfilled.

A representative from the development sector highlighted the importance of incorporating civil society and non-combatant support in post-conflict transition, mainly through the involvement of trained female psycho-social experts and personnel. She suggested the establishment of a peace corps similar to the US peace corps, which could aid in the reintegration of ex-combatants. She also emphasised the need to institutionalise the WPS agenda, which can only happen if the state takes ownership. Additionally, she noted that data on women's participation in peacekeeping is a secondary issue and that the approach to PKOs needs to be sensitised. Furthermore, she questioned why Pakistan is not leveraging its peacekeeping contribution to achieve larger foreign policy objectives beyond the soft image in response to incentives and strategic objectives regarding UNSC politics. Another development sector representative working on WPS raised several important points related to the role of women in UNPKOs. He noted that the October 2021 UN report highlighted the dichotomy between IHL and WPS agenda, suggesting that the latter needs to be better managed, formulated and resourced since its inception 20

years ago. He also raised concerns about the narrow definition of IHL and questioned the scope of ICRC in broadening this agenda.

Regarding the importance of exposure and learning, it was discussed that although the Pakistan Army is considered the best, there is room for improvement. The discussant suggests that we can learn from the successes of Bosnia and the experiences of Pakistani policewomen who can contribute to our learning. He also suggests addressing the lack of data, referring to the source or origin of female human resources participating in the law enforcement apparatus. In terms of opportunities to push for compliance with the WPS agenda, it was suggested to use incentives such as GSP Plus, which provides bonuses to states that send troops to risk areas. He also questions the mindset of female peacekeepers, asking if women are willing to join UN Peacekeeping missions voluntarily and their attitude towards this role. Overall, the need for greater exposure, learning and understanding of the WPS agenda and various ways to promote compliance and increase the participation of women in PKOs was emphasised.

Stakeholders representing academic institutions raised some important points regarding unique contributions made by female peacekeepers and factors that facilitate or inhibit their contribution to UNPKO – highlighting the need to expand the role of civil society, particularly in post-conflict transition, and emphasising the importance of trained women psycho-social experts and relevant personnel in establishing a peace corp. They also noted that institutionalising the WPS agenda is crucial and requires necessary reforms. However, the lack of empirical data and financial benefits for female peacekeepers remains a constraint. They also acknowledged Pakistan's progress towards the WPS agenda and the significance of ongoing discussions to sensitise the state to this issue. An academic stakeholder raised a question about the nature of roles performed by female peacekeepers and their training in conflict zones, observing that most of the functions performed by female peacekeepers are non-combatant positions and emphasised the need to explore their potential contributions in other areas. Additionally, a question was raised about whether female peacekeepers are trained differently than their male counterparts and whether their training is tailored to their unique challenges in conflict zones.

One stakeholder working on women's training and development had a different perspective on the progress made by Pakistan towards the WPS agenda, arguing that despite 20 years since the adoption of Resolution 1325, Pakistan is still discussing the initiation of the WPS agenda. She believed there needs to be a change in approach and that data sharing is essential. Suggesting that the role of female peacekeepers is beyond just cosmetic and vast; it is necessary to clarify the scope and transparency of women peacekeeping in terms of how they are selected. Furthermore, the stakeholder emphasised that women from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) strongly desire to contribute to peacekeeping and combatant operations, but there are challenges. It is essential to address these challenges to facilitate the participation of women in PKOs. She concludes that the state needs to take concrete steps to

implement the WPS agenda and ensure that women have equal opportunities to contribute to peacekeeping efforts.

Matthew Graham,<sup>30</sup> who worked in the front office of the Under-Secretary for DPKO as a liaison between UN missions and the office, shed light on the unique contribution of female peacekeepers in UNPKO. According to Graham, female peacekeepers were and still are in high demand due to the reputation of the UN being in a transitional phase and rebuilding itself from setbacks in Bosnia, Kosovo and Iraq. Furthermore, the issue of male peacekeepers involved in the rape of local women, particularly in Congo, resulted in a need for female peacekeepers in conflict zones. Female peacekeepers were found to be effective in handling corruption, policing, humanitarian aid and psycho-social and trauma issues, which made their operational requirement part of UNDPKO policy since 2008.

However, female peacekeepers face several challenges. One major issue in conflict zones is gender-based violence (GBV), which necessitates the presence of female peacekeepers but has its challenges. Female peacekeepers are often constrained in their roles compared to males due to limited access, mobility and willingness of locals to talk to them, especially in local patriarchal structures. The security of female peacekeepers is also a genuine concern, and the UN has to hire additional security personnel for female officers in the field, which can be a financial burden. Additionally, the bureaucratic setup rewards aggression and ambition, which makes it challenging for women to reach Director level positions. Female peacekeepers are also targets of militia groups in remote and rugged terrain, which present operational, linguistic and privacy issues. The UN recruits local women and NGOs to infuse a gendered approach to PKOs. The UN aims to make them liaisons with locals and involve them in joint committees with the mission. This approach allows NGOs and women to act beyond the UN policy mandate and find flexible solutions to conflict issues. UN policy is often broad and ad-hoc, making this approach better suited for women's empowerment in conflict zones.

The discussants generally agreed that women's participation in PKOs positively impacts the operational environment, but it is contingent on the local community's religious, cultural and social practices. Female officers deployed to Muslim-populated conflict zones in Bosnia and Kosovo believed they contributed positively to the missions. However, in conflict zones with predominantly non-Muslim populations, the locals' socio-cultural preferences had a substantive sway on the peacekeeping context. In her study, Heineken reported a similar scenario about female peacekeepers deployed in Sudan, where they do not recognise ladies as soldiers.<sup>31</sup> The attitudes of local communities towards peacekeepers vary from mission to mission; however, there are no conclusive answers to whether male and female peacekeepers are viewed differently, so more research is needed to understand the community perception.

Since the research was constrained in accessing the primary evidence, it relied on selected publications by women soldiers, which were few, uneven and could not be

deemed definitive. The written accounts of female soldiers indicate they have settled well in the peacekeeping role and had no difficulty adjusting to a new environment. One officer that served as an operational planning officer with MONUSCO wrote, "Working in a peacekeeping mission is one of the best experiences I have ever had as a woman and as a uniformed member of the Pakistani army."<sup>32</sup> Another UNAMID officer believed her experience had helped her become a "more competent professional and a humbler human being."<sup>33</sup> It demonstrates the desirability of including women in PKOs as their involvement fosters connectivity and empathy, but only in domains where locals culturally accept them.

## Conclusion

The study is an attempt to highlight the participation and achievements of Pakistani female peacekeepers in various UN-mandated missions. For a traditional country such as Pakistan, where for the longest women have not held combat or frontline roles in the military, the decision to pledge the desired 15% requirement for women in different PKOs is a significant benchmark in women empowerment and its role as a frontline state committed to global peacekeeping and adherence to UN principles. Furthermore, through their performance and conduct, these young and dynamic female peacekeepers have earned great laurels for the country and upheld the high standards set by the UN. Each acting as an ambassador of their country has left a positive imprint in local communities where they have served and, in many instances, been the role model for women in those areas. Empowering women makes them active stakeholders in their immediate and future security, laying the foundations for inclusive and sustainable peace.

Based on the views and perspectives of FGD participants, it can be concluded that women are making a unique contribution to UNPKO, particularly in non-combatant positions such as human rights officers, policing and humanitarian aid. However, challenges and barriers still inhibit female peacekeepers' contribution, such as gender-based violence, institutional inhibitions, and security issues. To infuse a gendered approach to PKOs, there is a need for more transparency and data sharing, clarification of the scope of female peacekeeping, and the recruitment of local women and NGOs. Overall, some progress has been made in recognising the role of women in peacekeeping, but there is still a long way to go to incorporate a gendered approach into UNPKO fully.

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