

Attention to gender increases security in operations: Examples from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

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U.S. Marine Corps Sgt. Jessica Domingo, right, and Cpl. Daisy Romero, assigned to a female engagement team (FET), speak with a man during a patrol in Marjah, Helmand province, Afghanistan. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Marianne T. Mangrum/Released)

Empirical evidence shows that security actors are more likely to accomplish their mission when they take into account the differing needs and perspectives of men and women. According to NATO's Civil-Military Cooperation Centre of Excellence (CCOE), greater attention to gender issues results in an enhancement of overall situational awareness and the provision of better advice to the senior decision maker.¹ In a variety of studies of stabilization and peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kosovo, Liberia, and Timor Leste, gender equality is recognized as a force multiplier in operational planning and mission execution.² A study of five Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan found that greater outreach resulting from communication with both men and women meant operations benefited from more nuanced intelligence.³

1 NATO Civil-Military Cooperation Centre of Excellence. (2008). *Gender Makes Sense: A Way to Improve your Mission*. (The Netherlands: NATO/CCOE), 10.

2 Dharmapuri, S. (Spring 2011). "Just Add Women and Stir." *Parameters*, 59.

3 Olsson, L., & Tejpar, J., (Eds) (2009). *Operational Effectiveness and UN Resolution 1325 – Practices and Lessons Learned from Afghanistan*. (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency).

These findings highlight the potential of fully implementing a collection of international policies to advance women's participation in peace and security. The watershed 2000 passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 created a global framework for mainstreaming gender in peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and post-conflict reconstruction. Four recent resolutions expand its provisions and promote its implementation.⁴ Through initially slow to act, many UN member states and regional entities, including security institutions, have devised policies to implement UNSCR 1325. In September 2009, NATO approved the Bi-Strategic Command Directive 40-1 "Integrating UNSCR 1325 and Gender Perspectives in the NATO Command Structures Including Measures for Protection During Armed Conflict," applicable to all international military or other organizations operating within the NATO chain of command and stating "women should be seen as actors to ensure sustainable peace, and should be involved in all stages of crisis or conflict." (1-1). Policymakers recently bolstered the European Union's "Comprehensive Approach on UNSCR 1325 and 1820 on women, peace and security" (15671/1/08 REV 1) with new robust indicators. As of February 2012, more than 34 countries have UNSCR 1325 National Action Plans that influence processes in ministries of defense and militaries around the world. A new US NAP on UNSCR 1325 calls on the US Department of Defense to lead efforts to promote women's inclusion by adapting theater-specific training, engaging women in planning processes, and integrating gender analysis into basic assessment processes.⁵

Based on this growing collection of evidence and policy, in 2011 the NATO Committee on Gender Perspectives sought assistance from The Institute for Inclusive Security to identify how incorporating gender perspectives positively influences operational effectiveness. The NATO Committee specifically sought evidence on how attention to gender can increase security in the organization's operations. The following findings result from a literature review as well as personal interviews with diverse multinational and national military and civilian personnel from Allied Command Operations, Allied Command Transformation, the Dutch Armed Forces, European Union Council Secretariat, NATO International Staff, the Norwegian Armed Forces, the Swedish Armed Forces, and the US Armed Forces. Findings are also based on plenary and small-group discussions during the two-day 2011 annual meeting of the NATO Committee on Gender Perspectives. The report reveals factors that increase security and specific examples of how

"Experience from previous operations shows that if we are able to implement a gender perspective in accordance with the UNSCR 1325/2000, we will have an improved chance to succeed with our mission, to bring peace and security to the whole society in our AO [area of operation]."

*– Lieutenant General Anders Lindström,
Director of Operations,
Swedish Armed Forces*

4 See resolutions UN Security Council Resolution 1820 on Women, Peace and Security, S/RES/1820 (2008); UN Security Council Resolution 1888 on Women, Peace and Security, S/RES/1888 (2009); UN Security Council Resolution 1889 on Women, Peace and Security, S/RES/1889 (2009); UN Security Council Resolution 1960 on Women, Peace and Security, S/RES/1960 (2010).

5 US National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, 2011.

incorporating gender perspectives positively influences operational effectiveness and increases security. Unless otherwise attributed, staff gathered content, including the case studies, through 20 semi-structured interviews.

Defining terms

“Security in operations” is considered to be the reduction of physical threats to personnel and equipment, as no widely accepted, single definition of the phrase exists. Interviewees described an array of ways in which attention to gender can reduce physical threats to personnel and operations. The following list is not exhaustive and may not universally reflect experiences in all theaters of operation. However, a combination of the following key factors often enhances security.

How does attention to gender increase security in operations?

- **Enhancing situational awareness through unique observations**

Women’s daily observations contribute to strengthening overall situational awareness, which nearly all interviewees described as being essential to security in operations. Through their unique roles in communities and families, women often know about people and events



Senior Airman Vanessa Velez, a convoy driver with the Bagram Provincial Reconstruction Team, sets out for her next mission. (U.S. Air Force photo by Master Sgt. Demetrius Lester)

that men do not. For example, when cultural norms dictate that women travel on foot to gather water or firewood, they may see and hear things men do not notice. When women gather firewood and water, by necessity they observe key terrain at roughly the same time every day. If the military had the troops available, they would likely try to mimic those behaviors.

- **Strengthening situational awareness through varied perspectives**

Different roles and responsibilities, such as collecting water and firewood, have broader implications for shaping women's perspectives. A woman's experience in her family and community shapes her attitudes, insights, and priorities. (As discussed in the following case study on Afghanistan, women's unique insights about a large upcoming event alerted US personnel to a potential misunderstanding with serious security implications.) Additionally, when they conduct searches and gather information, male and female personnel may look for different things because of their own backgrounds and experiences.⁶

- **Providing information about specific security threats**

Because of women's simultaneous presence in the public and private spheres, they can observe locations of weapons caches and have explicit knowledge about individuals within armed groups and the placement of hidden explosives. For example, women in the Mano River area exchanged information on guerilla movement, including arms transfers, within and across borders in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, which positioned them as facilitators of negotiations, encouraging individuals and groups to lay down their arms.⁷

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However, direct asks for military intelligence may present too great a risk to women and limit access to them in the future. As a rule, women should therefore not be asked to directly provide military intelligence. Best practices focus on using effective engagement activities to cultivate trusting relationships with women. These activities create channels for women to report on security threats if and when they feel comfortable doing so.⁸

6 Gender Force, (2007). *Good and Bad Examples: Lessons Learned from Working with UNSCR 1325 in International Missions*, 28.

7 Anderlini, S., & Conway, C. (2004). "Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration." In *Inclusive Security, Sustainable Peace: A Toolkit for Advocacy and Action*. (Washington, DC: Hunt Alternatives Fund and International Alert), 6.

8 Mansury, M., (2009). *PRT: A model for collaboration. The Institute for Inclusive Security*. (Washington, DC: Hunt Alternatives Fund).

- **Promoting operational effectiveness through gender-sensitive development**

Regularly consulting with women and men provides a fuller picture of local circumstances and results in operations that better address the entire community's needs and priorities. For instance, according to one NATO official, Dutch Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) officials in Uruzgan made plans to build an orchard in a central location. When Civil Affairs personnel learned from local women that they could not leave their children unattended at home so they could travel to the central location to work in the orchard, Dutch officials changed their approach and instead allocated trees to individual families. The families' livelihood program thrived. In another instance, women described the need to build walls around a school facility, explaining that the privacy the walls provided would enable girls to attend.

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- **Influencing the conflict's narrative**

Women are critical stakeholders not only because of the insights and information they provide but also because of the influence they wield within their families. The more women are engaged, the better they can understand the international military's mission, and how military operations can mean tangible gains for their communities. This understanding increases the probability that women will deter their sons and husbands from participating in insurgent or armed group activity, which, in turn, reduces the number of individuals planting improvised explosive devices and launching assaults on international military personnel. Conversely, operations that ignore women's perspectives risk encouraging hostility toward military operations and support for armed groups. Effective engagement of women assists in building or strengthening a base of local support, which enhances force protection while diminishing support for armed groups.

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- **Moderating political and religious extremism**

Women can also be important interlocutors for moderating political and religious extremism. In the public sphere, women can enhance democratic political processes by working across political party lines, advocating for the interests of marginalized groups, and linking grassroots perspectives to national debates. They often vote for candidates representing less hard-line perspectives. In part, this is because women are often the prime victims of political violence and extremist religious interpretation. In Afghanistan, for example, they have the most to lose from the Taliban's reclaiming power and are therefore natural allies of NATO forces.

- **Using gender norms to engage male informants**

Many documented cases illustrate that negotiations conducted by female soldiers are more successful than those handled by male soldiers, that informants in some locations divulge more information to Western women than to Western men, and that it is more appropriate for female soldiers to address issues related to women with local tribal leadership than it is for Western men to do so.⁹ Interviewees shared examples of men revealing information about specific security threats only to female NATO personnel and even refusing to share details with other men.

- **Increasing force acceptance**

Local communities can perceive female personnel as less threatening to local communities. Interviewees noted that in the Congo and Chad, such communities were more accepting of European Union Force (EUFOR) patrols that included women, as evidenced by fewer residents throwing stones at passing troops made up of women and men.¹⁰ Additionally, interviewees observed that British units using Female Engagement Teams were less frequently ambushed and experienced fewer IED attacks than all-male patrols.

- **Strengthening the capacities of government partners**

Stabilization operations have a greater chance of succeeding with a strong local government. The more effective the governing body, the greater the likelihood that this local partner will give NATO personnel accurate information on community needs and assistance in implementing stabilization programming. When women can meaningfully participate in governing bodies, they often enhance those institutions' transparency and accountability, and ultimately, their overall strength. According to the World Bank, increased participation of women in government is linked to lower levels of graft.¹¹ Women are often less directly connected to fighting forces than men, have fewer historical associations with longstanding powerbrokers and corrupt leaders, and have proven less susceptible to extorting funds intended for development purposes.

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9 Olsson, 2009.

10 Gya, G., Isaksson, C., & Martinelli, M., (2009). *Report on ESDP Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo* (New York: UNIFEM).

11 Dollar, D., Fisman, R., & Gatti, R. (October 1999). *Are Women Really the 'Fairer' Sex? Corruption and Women in Government*. The World Bank, Development Research Group/Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Network.

How does gender increase security and operational effectiveness? Some examples.

1. Swedish Provincial Reconstruction Team in Mazar-e-Sharif: Local women's perspectives strengthen situational awareness

Key factor:

- **Strengthening situational awareness through varied perspectives**

Through direct dialogue with local women, the Swedish PRT in Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan, was able to strengthen its situational awareness and avoid a misunderstanding that would have had negative implications for mission security. Personnel benefited from the technical expertise of a gender field adviser, whose recommendations on patrolling patterns led to the collection of critical information from a local family.

Intervention details

During the summer of 2009, an all-male rifle patrol within the Swedish PRT approached the PRT's gender field adviser to learn why the patrol never saw Afghan women in public. The PRT commander and chief of staff had been vocal about their interest in engaging "the other half of the population," and an extensive system of gender focal points in each military unit had increased awareness of gender issues across the PRT. The gender adviser worked with the team to understand exactly where the male soldiers were regularly patrolling.

Upon reviewing a map of their typical routes, the gender field adviser identified that the soldiers were traveling only on large streets frequented by men. She suggested that they venture into smaller, less busy streets. The rifle patrol took her advice and complemented its patrol of major thoroughfares with trips into smaller streets and alleys. The patrol was pleased when it began to encounter local women. They were surprised when women approached their all-male team, including a male interpreter, and wanted to speak.

In one instance, several women approached the patrol and, after a brief conversation, invited them to their home to meet their male family members. While at the home, a conversation ensued over tea, and the topic of "what they each were looking forward to" came up. The women explained that they were looking forward to a large wedding that was going to take place in the town in two days. Several hundred family members and relatives were going to descend on the town for the celebration. None of the men had shared this response.

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U.S. Marine Corps Sgt. Jessica Domingo, right, and Cpl. Daisy Romero worked with infantry Marines by engaging women and children in support of the International Security Assistance Force. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Marianne T. Mangrum/Released)

What difference did it make to incorporate a gender perspective?

The upcoming event the women described was critical to enhancing the soldiers' situational awareness. When hundreds of people descended on the town 48 hours later, the mission knew to expect them. Additionally, that male soldiers and interpreters could engage directly with local women not only helped extend the range of possible engagements in their specific area of operation (AO) but also proved the fluidity of cultural norms related to speaking with women.

How did the intervention impact operational security and effectiveness?

The women's information about an upcoming major event in the town allowed the PRT time to create a plan for monitoring the flows of people and helped redirect mission assets and personnel. The details about the wedding also prevented a potential escalation of tensions when the international military presence was met with an unexpected wave of movement into the town. The information helped the force avoid circumstances in which hundreds of people arriving in the area would surprise and overwhelm military personnel. Without a benign explanation, personnel could interpret the movement as an insurgent tactic or other form of aggression, which could lead to immediate violence as well as longer-term risks to the force from a resentful community.

2. European Union Force in Chad: Visible presence of women in the military and dialogue with local women increase force acceptance

Key factors:

- **Enhancing situational awareness through unique observations**
- **Influencing the conflict's narrative**
- **Increasing force acceptance**

By increasing direct engagement with the local female population, the European Union Force Chad/CAR (also EUFOR Tchad/RCA) was able to more fully achieve its mandate to protect civilians, facilitate delivery of humanitarian aid, and ensure the safety of UN personnel. Dialogue with local women created a more comprehensive view of security threats in the area and increased force acceptance.

Intervention details

Upon its 2008 deployment, the EU Force in Chad was met with local hostility. Locals accused the force of stealing the best agricultural land and perceived it as a colonial holdover. As a result, community members refused to engage with EUFOR personnel and were outwardly aggressive to patrols and convoys; they regularly threw stones at troops. The mission showed films and held information sharing sessions in an attempt to raise awareness of the EUFOR mission, but audiences were mostly male and tensions still ran high.

Eager to increase force acceptance and thereby contribute to force protection, in October 2008, EUFOR personnel organized meetings with local women. The gender adviser got approval from the force commander for the meetings by reporting entirely new information about the local area she had gathered through conversations with local women. She asserted that meetings had the potential to not only increase force acceptance but also enhance situational awareness for the mission.

In the southern, predominantly Christian part of Chad, local radio broadcasted the information about the meetings. Sessions were held in a neutral location outside the force compound, typically at schools and during the afternoon to decrease security threats to the women. The mission provided a small security detail. The meetings were flexibly structured, allowing the 50–60 participants to come and go as needed so they could carry out their daily activities. The three female

meeting facilitators, including the mission Gender Adviser and a Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) officer, were interested in the local security situation but eased into discussions about specific security threats by asking first about women's families and livelihoods. A local female interpreter, affiliated with the radio station, facilitated the session using the local Arabic dialect and French.

In the northern, predominantly Muslim part of the country, rather than directly advertising the meetings, CIMIC teams worked through local NGO contacts to identify possible meeting participants. Adhering to local custom, CIMIC teams discussed plans with the local sultan or prefect. The teams were also able to clarify misunderstandings with local elders. Earlier statements about "not having any contact with our women" were clarified; the elders wished only that the women were not disrespected. An all-female EUFOR team with female interpreters was stood up within the Polish contingent to ensure there would be only female personnel as part of the dialogue. Personnel held a first meeting inside a private home. A female, Muslim, Arabic interpreter was deemed culturally appropriate for the group and increased the women's level of acceptance of the interaction. The women were grateful to have the opportunity to offer their perspectives on security and community priorities; no one had asked them these types of questions before.

What difference did it make to incorporate a gender perspective?

The force collected critical information from women about local security threats that prompted it to adapt its operations. The women explained that local police regularly robbed them when they returned from collecting firewood or water outside town. As EUFOR was cooperating with the defense and police force, the public conflated the EUFOR troops with the local police. EUFOR thereby needed to address police corruption, but also the community's association of EUFOR with the corrupt police.

In another meeting, local women revealed security information in a conversation about how they collected water and firewood. The presence of armed groups in nearby mountains was causing the women to collect in new locations. No community men traveled regularly to the mountains; only women were privy to this information. Shortly thereafter, a CIMIC group ensured that the local base was aware of armed elements nearby, and patrols visited the unstable area.

Engagement with women in the north unintentionally provided an opportunity for community building. When asked to participate in the meeting, the women designed a system of appointing one individual

from each village to represent her community. A positive consequence of the meeting was the creation of a network of women across areas of traditional rivalry. Given the competition for resources in the region—land, firewood, etc.—the women vowed to continue their network as an informal dispute resolution forum.

Two weeks after the initial meeting, the women contacted the Polish troops for a second meeting—a sea change from previous hostility to the EUFOR troops. The women had learned more about the EUFOR mission and were able to share that information with their families and communities. The men in the area witnessed that the force was not there to harm the women, thereby creating a more positive impression of its intentions. Lastly, the EUFOR mission had a better sense of the unique security needs of men and women in the local area.

How did the intervention affect operational security and effectiveness?

Women provided important information that enhanced EUFOR's situational awareness in Chad. They pointed out police corruption and shared community priorities that had not been shared by men. As in the case of women reporting the presence of nearby armed groups, the information shared had direct implications on force protection. The meetings also provided an opportunity for EUFOR to educate women about the mission mandate and answer specific questions. The women shared this information with their families and communities, who had misconceptions about the troop presence. When the community had more information about the force, through female interlocutors, relations improved, force acceptance increased, and EUFOR was better able to fulfill its mandate.

The use of Female Engagement Teams (FETs) in Afghanistan increased the number of trained female military on patrol who engage directly with local communities.



A Royal Navy Servicewoman conducts firearms drills as part of the standing NATO Maritime Group 2 (SNMG2). © Crown Copyright, Photographer: POA(Phot) Owen King

3. United States Female Engagement Teams in Sangin: Female military personnel serve as successful interlocutors with local men

Key factors:

- **Providing information on specific security threats**
- **Using gender norms to engage male informants**

Female military personnel were not only effective interlocutors with local women but also with local men. The use of Female Engagement Teams (FETs) in Afghanistan increased the number of trained female military on patrol who engage directly with local communities. Near Sangin district in Helmand province, Afghanistan, in August 2010, a FET member with the Marine Expeditionary Force (Forward) I (MEF) was the only interlocutor accepted by a male informant who shared lifesaving information about the location of IEDs and the identities of Taliban supporters.

Intervention details

In mid-2010, Sangin district was heavy with insurgent activity and called one of the most dangerous areas in Afghanistan. Working alongside an infantry unit, a US female corporal was one of two members of a FET visiting a village in Sangin that had not yet been patrolled. The corporal approached a male farmer, and they began a lengthy conversation about his crops. The FET established excellent rapport with the male farmer, who was thrilled to be talking to someone who shared his enthusiasm for his favorite crop: watermelon.

The farmer walked the corporal to his field and gave her watermelons as a gift. She accepted them, and as they continued talking, the man revealed that he had information about security threats and Taliban activity in the area. The corporal told the man that she would alert her colleagues and that they would return to speak with him.

Upon returning to the Forward Operating Base (FOB) and sharing information about the situation, the unit commander, intelligence staff, and others returned to speak with the farmer. The farmer received them, and they sat in his field for some time exchanging pleasantries, until the farmer revealed that he would not share the information unless the female Marine returned. While FETs are not designed to have a direct intelligence-gathering purpose, the corporal was sent for and asked to participate. She joined the conversation with the farmer, who revealed the location of several IED belts laid in the area, as well as key Taliban conspirators in that region. The intelligence staff later verified and corroborated the information.

What difference did it make to incorporate a gender perspective?

The FET member's direct engagement with a local male villager revealed critical security information. Female personnel can work within stereotypes to exploit gender norms to achieve a desired end. As several leading military advisers in Afghanistan explained, "Experience shows that many local men actually prefer talking to US women than to US men."¹² A gender analysis of male culture would have revealed that Pashtun men can often be motivated by a desire to "save face," making disclosures to other men unlikely. The FET commander in Sangin perceived that female military personnel changed the dynamic when talking with men, a perception corroborated by studies of PRTs in Afghanistan.¹³

How did the intervention impact operational security and effectiveness?

The information provided by the male farmer to female military personnel had direct implications for force protection. The safe removal of several IED belts saved the lives of military personnel and created a safer environment for the local population. Beyond situational awareness, details about the identities of Taliban supporters helped advance intelligence gathering to inform operations.

¹² Pottinger, M., Jilani, H., & Russo, C. (2010). "Half-Hearted: Traying to Win Afghanistan Without Afghan Women." *Small Wars Journal*.

¹³ Olsson, 2009.

Recommendations

The Institute for Inclusive Security and the NATO Committee on Gender Perspectives generated recommendations and suggested indicators for further enhancing attention to gender in NATO-led operations. The following is an example of the full recommendation list.¹⁴

- Consult regularly with local women in the theater of operations. Structures designed to promote sustained, repeated contact with women should be prioritized to promote confidence building. Make the necessary force structure adaptations to ensure women are trained and can go on all patrols and engagements.
- Require inclusion of female soldiers and officers in outreach units and patrols. This is of special importance for Civil Affairs/Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC), Psychological Operations, (PSYOPS) and Human Intelligence (HUMINT). Teams may be all female or mixed, reflecting local needs and circumstances.
- Require that each unit has a gender focal point who liaises with a senior gender field adviser. For example, the Swedish PRT in Mazar-e-Sharif has between 20 and 25 gender focal points across its units. A commander's order required contingents to identify focal points.
- Mandate that all planning processes and resulting concepts of operation (CONOPS) at the brigade and battalion level include attention to gender, specifically plans for direct engagement with local women, and gender-sensitive information operations campaigns.
- Adapt databases specifically for tracking female contacts. For example, the Dutch Armed Forces complemented existing "red" and "white" plate databases listing individuals allied with the force; those viewed as hostile had a "pink plate" database specifically for female key leaders.
- Ensure all personnel, including unit commanders and patrol members, have overall basic and in-theater training on gender issues. Training should be practical, related to local circumstances and focused on tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs), rather than theory.
- Provide mentoring opportunities for senior military personnel to develop expertise on gender issues. For example, Swedish generals that participate in a "GenderForce" program are partnered with a senior gender adviser for one year. Nearly all have been promoted since their mentorship.

¹⁴ For a full list of recommendations, please contact The Institute for Inclusive Security.

