



The Bangui National Forum took place in the capital of the Central African Republic (CAR) from 4–11 May 2015, and concluded with the adoption of the Republican Pact for Peace, National Reconciliation and Reconstruction.



Policy & Practice Brief

Knowledge for durable peace

Protecting the rights of women through community-focused approaches to strengthening gender in African peace support operations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Central African Republic

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Executive summary

Gender is increasingly becoming an integral consideration in peace processes, as called for in the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, adopted in 2000 as the first ever formal women, peace and security resolution passed by the United Nations (UN). Other UN documents that recognise the importance of gender mainstreaming in peace support operations include the report of the UN High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations, and the 2015 review of the UN Peacebuilding Architecture. Both processes reflect the UN's focus on encouraging substantive inclusivity on the basis of gender. Women's inclusion in peacekeeping at community level has evolved, as their increased engagement is now known to be key to the successful implementation of mission mandates, as women in conflict and post-conflict nations have as great an understanding of the peace and security challenges that form part of their lived realities as their male counterparts. This Policy & Practice Brief (PPB) advances recommendations to the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and other UN agencies working in peacekeeping environments. These recommendations aim to share ideas on how best to address implementation challenges around UNSCR 1325 at community level, and in ultimately responding to the needs of vulnerable groups, particularly women and girls, in the context of peacekeeping operations by involving them in responding to highlighted challenges.

Introduction

In 2015, a UN global study on the Implementation of UNSCR 1325, which documents 15 years of progress achieved, or lack thereof, was published. The study highlighted key recommendations for responding to the needs of women and girls in conflict. However, even with all the reviews and all the women, peace and security-focused resolutions passed after UNSCR 1325, with the latest being in 2016 (UNSCR 2272),² the needs of women before, during and after conflict are still inadequately addressed. These necessities include economic empowerment, access to healthcare, education and security and safety from sexual violence. In responding to these challenges inclusive approaches by peacekeeping missions that involve women in decision-making and the implementation of programmes aimed at resolving conflict, improving livelihoods and contributing to sustainable development are key.

A key policy document, UNSCR 1325 reaffirms the important role played by women in preventing and resolving conflicts, engaging in negotiations for peace, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian responses and post-conflict reconstruction. It emphasises the need to prevent sexual and gender-based violence (S&GBV) in conflict situations. Violence against women and girls is strongly linked to gender inequalities and harmful socio-cultural norms, and is intimately linked to the existence of strong – and negative – conceptions of masculinity, the breakdown of traditional family and social structures, low economic empowerment and the militarisation of societies, which has the potential to negatively impact women's human rights and place restrictions on their mobility.³

The pervasive human rights, socio-economic, health, and political inequalities that disproportionately affect women and girls impede Africa's efforts to achieve transformative and sustainable economic development. This is most evident in countries in the Great Lakes region of Africa. For instance, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Central African Republic (CAR) have long been affected by conflict, with women bearing the brunt of the wars, as casualties, victims and survivors. The 2015 Human Development Report,⁴ published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), ranks the DRC at 176 and CAR at 187, out of 188 countries documented. These rankings include a Gender Development Index and Gender Inequality Index of the two countries, which paints a picture of pervasive gender inequalities in the two countries, and the particular vulnerabilities of women and girls to sexual violence.

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A culture of impunity for sexual violence often exists during times of conflict, feeding into the cycle of war, and undermining the achievement of peace and security in post-conflict countries. To bridge these gaps, there is now greater recognition of the centrality of ensuring gender equality and women's empowerment if development is to be sustainable, and in post-conflict reconstruction processes, evidenced by increasing gender-sensitive projects, reporting, institutional reforms, calls for the inclusion of women in leadership and insistence on gender mainstreaming in the planning and execution of peacekeeping missions. Over the years, there has been rising awareness and substantial increases in mainstreaming gender in peace and security processes, by institutions like the UN and the African Union (AU), through their prioritisation of gender-related projects for funding, and the mainstreaming of UNSCR 1325 into all peace and security activities, including training and capacity-building. The last 20 years have seen a significant increase in global, regional and national commitments to gender mainstreaming in projects and processes. Whilst many gender mainstreaming policies have been developed to support implementation of UNSCR 1325 and subsequent resolutions on women, peace and security, the situation of women remains precarious in these countries and their conditions remain poor. In spite of the critical role they play in sustaining their communities, women in the DRC are often treated as inferior and are largely excluded from decision-making at community level. These perceptions have perpetuated a cycle of economic, social, and political exclusion of women from decision-making positions, and an ability to protect their basic needs.⁵

Some recommendations from studies undertaken by the UN in 2000⁶ and 2015⁷ on the implementation of UNSCR 1325, for instance the need for consistent funding mechanisms and redressing the persisting dearth of women in political and peace processes, amongst others, need to be re-emphasised and implemented consistently in current UN peacekeeping operations. Further, some of the recommendations put forward on improving the situations of women have either been partially implemented or not implemented at all, due to reasons such as resource constraints. Women's situations, and roles in peace and conflict resolution, still rest in the margins of peace operations agendas, leading to small budgetary allocations to programmes focusing on women's participation in peacekeeping.⁸ But these are not marginal issues, they are core

matters affecting almost half the population in these countries, towards which more financial and technical resources should be directed if progress is to be made in solving the security challenges women currently face in the DRC and CAR.

It is important to note that the approved budget for UN peacekeeping operations for the period 1 July 2015 to 30 June 2016 is approximately US\$8.27 billion.⁹ Furthermore, peace operations account for 90 per cent of all UN secretariat procurement. Because of the size of the UN Peace Operations budget, UN DPKO and other UN agencies or departments supporting peacekeeping are the most pragmatic offices to target with the recommendations. Due to the multiple efforts, and resource streams, of the different UN agencies to gender in peacekeeping environments, however, it is difficult to ascertain the final amount dedicated to the implementation of UNSCR 1325 by the UN – the point being that funding is available to implement some recommendations

Gender gaps in the peacekeeping environment in the Great Lakes region

The 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action identified 12¹⁰ critical areas of concern and priority for women: women and poverty, education and training of women, women and health, violence against women, women and armed conflict,¹¹ women and the economy, women in power and decision-making, institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women, human rights of women, women and the media, women and the environment, and the girl child. These issues, highlighted over 20 years ago, still present major challenges to the lives of women, particularly those in Africa, hindering peacekeeping, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction efforts. For instance, in 2014, UN agencies reported 2 527 and 11 769 incidences of conflict-related sexual violence in CAR and the DRC respectively;¹² this figure presents the tip of the iceberg, as cases are thought to be underreported. It is clear that more needs to be done to address issues of women and poverty, noting that there is a direct link between women's low (or lack of) economic empowerment and their vulnerability to S&GBV, which is exacerbated during times of conflict, as reflected by incidences in countries in Africa's Great Lakes region.

Reports indicate that militia in CAR have used rape to deter women from undertaking economic activities, for example selling in the Ramandji market, in Kilomètre 5. Women are also victims of abduction and forced marriage by ex-Séléka officers in the capital Bangui, in Bouar, and other areas affected by the conflict. There are also credible reports of girls being kept in military camps and becoming pregnant as a result of sexual slavery. Human Rights Watch documented cases in which perpetrators used rape to punish women and girls suspected of interacting with people from the other side of the sectarian divide.¹³ Greater efforts are needed to ensure that displaced populations are provided with alternative income-generating opportunities, with special emphasis on the needs of women, who are often responsible for the livelihoods of entire households during times of conflict, and in post-conflict periods.

A complex and confusing assortment of armed militias operate in eastern DRC. Some are purely criminal, others have loosely political goals, and many have links with neighbouring states. Instability caused by their presence, and poverty in the DRC have created a slow economy.¹⁴ Years of economic decline and conflict have acutely affected women, many of whom have become widows, and have been forced to find ways – including begging and prostitution – to support their families. Besides the cases of sexual violence by armed groups in the DRC, there were also numerous accusations that United Nations Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) peacekeepers engaged in sex acts of a transactional nature with local women amounting to sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA).¹⁵ Similar allegations have been levelled against United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) forces.¹⁶ There are efforts by peacekeeping missions to address these allegations and support survivors, by working in partnership with local organisations to respond. Often, however, local organisations have limited resources (both financial and technical) with which to support all cases in the community, thus there is need for strengthened capacities for such organisations. With more efforts directed at responding, less goes to prevention, particularly at community level. The women, girls and sometimes boys and men vulnerable to sexual violence, abuse and exploitation are often displaced persons. Displacement may sometimes lead vulnerable people to engage in transactional sex in exchange for money or food. More often, individuals are

unaware of where to go for help, and communities are not clear on how to respond to cases of sexual exploitation and abuse. Besides these challenges, low prosecution rates of perpetrators of SEA and weak prosecuting mechanisms at country level further reinforce the concept of impunity in relation to conflict-related sexual violence committed by peacekeepers. Inadequate national capacities and expertise to investigate and prosecute acts of sexual violence remain one of the main impediments to ensuring accountability for related crimes. This situation often leads to widespread impunity that impacts access to justice and security, and the safety of survivors.¹⁷

The prevalence of conflict also affects the level of women's political participation, leading to low numbers of women in governance and decision-making positions. The percentage of women in the DRC's Lower or Single House stands at 8.9 per cent, while the percentage in the Upper House or Senate stands at 4.6 per cent.¹⁸ Similar statistics for CAR are not currently available. This representation in governance structures also impacts responses to the needs of women at community level. The electoral system in CAR, for instance, obliges women to show proof of land ownership before they can run in elections.¹⁹ The MINUSCA Electoral Assistance Division (EAD) continued to work with the National Elections Authority (ANE) to ensure that the elections were successful and peaceful, including by integrating and responding to gender mainstreaming issues in the electoral process, as well as providing technical, logistical and security assistance.²⁰

... low prosecution rates of perpetrators and weak prosecuting mechanisms at country level for proven cases of sexual exploitation and abuse further reinforce the concept of impunity in relation to conflict-related sexual violence committed by peacekeepers

Despite ongoing developments in the implementation of UNSCR 132521 in peacekeeping environments, the situations and living conditions of women in these contexts remain poor and low. The efforts of the UN at strategic and mission level should focus more on strengthening the agency of communities

and supporting organisations working on gender mainstreaming in peacekeeping environments. In the Great Lakes region, state and non-state actors, including civil society organisations working on gender, women, peace and security issues have made significant progress, which the UN can build on and strengthen, in its efforts to mainstream gender in mission environments.

Key to effective implementation of UNSCR 1325 is resolving the coordination challenges amongst actors (local and international) and processes working on women, gender, peace and security. Uncoordinated approaches further strain the limited resources available for gender programming. While there are many provisions for gender mainstreaming in Africa's peace operations, these have mostly remained as strategies on paper, lacking the requisite political will and financial support for them to be translated into action for impact. The objectives of some of the key International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) instruments on addressing sexual violence, including the Kampala Declaration (2011) and ICGLR Protocol on the Prevention and Suppression of Sexual Violence against Women²² and Children (2006) are yet to be fully realised. The UN should aim to strengthen its efforts to support the realisation of the objectives of these instruments that call for stronger community engagement in responding to gender issues in the region.

Sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers in Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Women, in particular those at internally displaced persons' (IDP's) sites, lack security, access to quality shelter, hospitals, medicine, market structures, water, food, and education facilities, increasing their vulnerabilities to the effects of poverty and conflict-related sexual violence. The threat of sexual violence is the number one fear for women and girls caught up in the CAR crisis.²³ Similarly, reports from the DRC²⁴ indicate that sexual violence is widespread and includes gang rape, abduction for purposes of sexual slavery, forced participation of family members in rape, and the mutilation of women's genitalia with knives and guns, among other atrocities.

The conflicts in CAR and the DRC have increased the vulnerability of civilians; allegations of SEA by peacekeepers were first reported by the UN in 2004 in the DRC. Since then, there have been more cases reported that implicate peacekeepers, both UN and non-UN. As of 29 February 2016, 25 cases of abuse by peacekeepers had been recorded, with MINUSCA and the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) accounting for 92 per cent of these allegations in 2016.

Sexual exploitation and abuse allegations for all categories of UN personnel per year²⁵

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Allegations (total) ²⁶	127	83	112	85	75	60	66	52	69	25
MINUSCA									22	22
% of total allegations									31.9	88
MONUC	59	40	59	35						
% of total allegations	46.5	48.2	52.7	41.2						
MONUSCO					32	25	23	14	16	1
% of total allegations					42.7	41.7	34.9	26.9	23.2	4

This data reflects UN Investigations Division of the Office of Internal Oversight Services reports dated up to 29 February 2016

These statistics reflect the need for new approaches in these two, and other, mission environments to prevent and respond to incidences of conflict-related sexual violence, exploitation and abuse. While UNSCR 2272 (2016), and other similar measures, reinforce the UN's action of replacing all units of the troop- or police-contributing countries whose peacekeepers are implicated in allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse,²⁷ there is need to strengthen prevention by communities.

Addressing UNSCR 1325 implementation challenges – some recommendations

Strengthen the strengthening of capacities of actors in mission environments through:

Continuous, specialised and sustained training for peacekeeping personnel on gender issues to encourage changes in attitudes: The UN should consider ensuring continuous training of peacekeeping personnel on issues of gender and women's rights. The UN should take the approach of integrating practical training on changing attitudes towards women's rights. Peacekeepers originating from countries with better records of gender equality and equity may hold values that are more in line with treating women as equals, instead of being potential sources of exploitation. Due to the complex nature of current peace operations, it is increasingly important for military, police and civilian personnel to be equipped with practical skills and contextual knowledge on human rights. The training should cover prevention of S&GBV, and explicitly incorporate situational information on the impact of armed conflict on women and girls, and on the critically important roles and contributions of women and girls in preventing and ending armed conflict. Such training will prepare peacekeepers to more effectively collaborate and engage with local communities. The training should be sustainable, and not just one-off events.

Entering into constructive partnerships to generate and develop capacities of regional, national and community actors: It is imperative that the UN strengthens its external partnership with think tanks and social movements to address gender issues in peace operations environments in CAR and the DRC. Such partnerships are already working in the DRC, and actors striving to ensure the protection of women in CAR can benefit from lessons accruing from such partnerships. UN peace operations should also

improve opportunities for collaboration with women's groups at the local and regional levels, to encourage and promote local women's participation in peace processes and state-building. Political processes supported by UN peace operations should prioritise the development of dedicated dialogue platforms for the inclusion of women's issues into peace processes, as well as state-building approaches. The Framework of Cooperation between the ICGLR and the UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict (SRSG-SVC), signed on 23 September 2014, is an example of such collaborative approaches. The framework highlights the UN's support in consolidating the Kampala-based ICGLR Regional Training Facility's capacity and strengthening its competencies, including through provision of experts, sharing of knowledge, experiences and information, to enhance joint efforts to build the capacities of actors in the region to address sexual violence.²⁸

Strengthening men's agency and capacity to prevent sexual violence and protect the rights of women:

Based on the realities of men and women in situations of conflict, it is clear that it is not possible to develop a truly gendered approach to understanding conflict and peace without analysing and considering men's perspectives and, in particular, without holding a view about men's relationships to violence. UNSCR 2242²⁹ on women, peace and security, adopted in October 2015, reiterates the importance of engaging men and boys as partners in promoting women's participation in the prevention and resolution of armed conflict, peacebuilding and post-conflict situations. An increasingly popular approach to reducing violence, especially between men and women, is to focus on men as 'change agents', based on the idea that men susceptible to committing violence against women can change if they are helped to understand the causes and consequences of their predatory and risk-seeking behaviour. Men are central to gender (in) equality, yet men's agency is often absent from the gender discourse. Men's agency and power in perpetuating and addressing discrimination and exclusion needs to be acknowledged and included in the discourse. The UN should therefore intensify its effort in working with local men's groups, youth associations, and male traditional leaders; who are often gate keepers in the community, and without whose participation no real change can be achieved.

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Increase financial resources gender considerations in peacekeeping operations through:

Supporting funding for women’s compensation and reparations: Increased funding should be directed to local organisations that often have detailed knowledge – rooted in local lived realities – of the social and cultural barriers to gender equality and obstacles to the promotion and protection of women’s rights. These institutions should be able to recognise and address the impacts of gender inequalities at local level, leveraging on the strengths of communities. The UN can contribute to breaking these barriers by ensuring that humanitarian aid and funding provides for the full range of medical, legal, psychosocial and livelihood services to victims of rape (often women) and other forms of sexual violence. A victims’ assistance programme is operational in both MONUSCO and MINUSCA. However, the UN should ensure that reparations awarded through judicial or administrative mechanisms are made available to survivors of sexual violence during times of conflict. Multi-sectoral approaches to the provision of reparations should be strengthened as part of post-conflict transition initiatives and reparations programmes should receive consistent and sustainable funding. The presence of these mechanisms provides a platform for strengthening trust among victims and reinforcing their confidence in judicial processes. Emphasis should also be placed on trauma-healing for survivors. In the absence of healing, survivors of conflict and sexual violence continue feeding the cycle of conflict negatively – thus trauma-healing is key in preventing conflict.

Increase women’s participation in peace operations by:

Supporting efforts to grow the number of qualified women available for peacekeeping missions: Women continue to be underrepresented in peacekeeping forces. The dynamics of conflict call for both uniformed and civilian capabilities to meet the operational demands of effective peacekeeping. Due to the impact of S&GBV in mission environments, the UN should consider supporting the efforts of member states and other actors – such as the AU – to increase the number of qualified women in the security forces, as well as in civilian capacities. The UN can do this by supporting review processes in the defence and police forces, and by providing technical and financial support for implementing national gender quotas linked to peacekeeping. More attention should be paid to, on the one hand, the revision of national policies inhibiting women’s participation in the security forces and, on the other, the development of policies supporting the deployment of women in peace operations. This will help to broaden opportunities for women police and military officers’ deployment in peacekeeping missions. The UN should also support the efforts of member states to develop a gender policy on force generation to address the recruitment, force preparation, retention and advancement of female uniformed personnel in missions. A business case for increasing the number of female personnel in peacekeeping environments is the fact that there have not been any cases reported of female peacekeepers being implicated in allegations of sexual violence, abuse and exploitation. Further, the presence of women in peacekeeping missions in civil, military and police functions may encourage women from local communities to report acts of sexual violence.

Strengthening the roles of gender experts at all levels and aspects of peace operations: The UN should strengthen gender analysis during mission planning, mandate development, implementation and mission drawdown. In addition to a general call to include gender perspectives in the work of the UN and the deployment of gender experts and advisors, it is important to redefine the roles of these experts and advisors. For some missions, there is only one gender expert or advisor who is expected to support the entire mission. Increasingly, the UN is also adopting the use of gender focal points in missions. Some of the missions primarily depend on gender focal points, which limits the amount of work that these people, who already have core responsibilities

(with gender mainstreaming as an add-on), can implement. The role of gender focal points should be strengthened and funded to ensure the adoption of effective gendered approaches in missions. During preparations for the mission, the UN should authorise and commission special fact-finding operations related to the security of women and their participation in peace efforts prior to the drafting of any resolutions and/or mandates pertaining to the establishment of peacekeeping missions.

Supporting a gendered development approach by:

Strengthening the gender components of the Quick Impact Projects (QUIPs): The UN should encourage donors, and work with other actors, to fund income-generating projects and micro-credit schemes aimed at improving the economic conditions of local women in post-conflict countries where missions are deployed. The QUIPs implemented by these missions should also be gender sensitive and reflect the disproportionate strife suffered by women in conflict areas. The mission should set aside a portion of QUIPs funds for programmes that respond specifically to gender issues, including supporting the victim assistance programme infrastructure and funding projects such as gender desks in police stations and hospitals, with particular focus on rural areas where such infrastructures are not fully developed.

Enhancing the link between gender in peacekeeping and the achievement of sustainable development goals: Gender equality is a prerequisite not only for development and growth, but for sustainable peace and stability. Further, greater gender equality leads to faster economic growth, democratic inclusiveness and better human recovery. This is also reflected in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) seek to realise the enjoyment of human rights by all, and to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. It envisions a world which invests in its children and in which every child grows up free from violence and exploitation. It also envisions a world in which every woman and girl enjoys full gender equality and where all legal, social and economic barriers to their empowerment have been removed. The UN and other actors in CAR and the DRC should work together to establish and implement the various linkages between the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and the realisation of the SDGs, which were passed in 2015. Women's

political and socio-economic development plays a central role in achieving these goals. The UN should work with other actors to create more opportunities for women to engage in economic empowerment activities. The linkage of these two main strategic objectives in a mission area provides for increases in financing and reduces the overlapping of efforts, noting that most member states make budgetary provisions and receive external funds for the SDGs. If this is linked to strengthening gender in peacekeeping, it forms a platform for responding to the vulnerabilities of women to sexual violence, exploitation and abuse.

Strengthen protection of women and girls in armed conflict by:

Enhancing humanitarian support for female refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs): The GLR has witnessed many refugees crossing borders as a result of the conflicts going on in the region. The DRC and CAR both have IDPs who face the very real risk of starving. In June 2015, the total population of concern in DRC was 2 001 006³⁰ and 517 204³¹ in CAR. Noting that all categories of refugees and IDPs (women, children, men and the aged, among others) suffer extremely from lack of basic needs like water, healthcare, proper housing, community infrastructure, education, nutrition and protection, the UN system should devote more resources to the protection of women IDPs and refugees, who are disproportionately more exposed to sexual violence, exploitation and abuse. The UN should focus on strengthening the capacities of national authorities and local organisations to ensure the protection of civilian populations, with particular emphasis on women and girls, including security from conflict-related sexual violence. Mainstreaming women's empowerment considerations into humanitarian activities is key to ensuring a rights-based and effective humanitarian system serving women, men, boys and girls affected by disasters and conflict. Cases of sexual violence, exploitation and abuse in both countries have reportedly occurred in IDP camps, or near the camps, and should be systematically investigated and addressed.

Supporting community infrastructures for the protection of women and girls: In most conflict environments there are weak or no structures in place to facilitate the work that needs to be done to adequately protect women. Simple measures like providing escorts for women embarking on essential trips for water or wood, can be helpful in deterring

perpetrators of sexual violence against women and girls. More particularly, in the aftermath of conflict, weak justice systems and socio-economic and cultural factors discourage women from reporting abuses and promote a culture of impunity. The UN can bridge this gap and strengthen mechanisms for accessing justice for women survivors by working with host countries to institutionalise judicial systems. While it is first and foremost the responsibility of governments, the UN should also emphasise its support to women in this regard. The demand on UN peacekeepers to provide security comes with a disclaimer that the UN cannot protect everyone, every time from everything. A key success inherent in peace and security issues is to utilise and engage community structures. For protection strategies to have a meaningful impact in a society in conflict, increased local engagement should be emphasised in peace operations environments. The UN should, therefore, support processes and coordination systems that ensure the inclusion of local authorities, among them indigenous and traditional leaders, in developing strategies for the protection of women and girls in peacekeeping environments. This has the impact of increasing ownership and enhancing inclusive participation. Involving families and communities to identify areas and situations where women and girls are particularly vulnerability is important for strengthening preventive mechanisms. It is important to empower community leaders and members to employ and utilise protection mechanisms for their collective benefit.

Enhancing accountability and combating impunity on violence against women: Immunity does not translate to impunity. Weak judicial systems and structures provide loopholes for impunity for peacekeepers implicated in cases of sexual violence. All member states contributing peacekeeping forces are expected to take necessary measures to bring to justice their own nationals responsible for such crimes, as called for in UNSCR 1400 (2002) and in subsequent measures and resolutions, including UNSCR 2272. The UN should also ensure that the principle of no amnesty for perpetrators of grave human rights violations, including sexual violence crimes, is adhered to by member states. The body should further ensure that member states that do not take action on such misconduct are held accountable for the actions of their officers. Some of these accountability measures are reflected in the steps taken by the UN, like withholding reimbursements to troop-contributing countries whose peacekeepers have been implicated in allegations of SEA.

Enhance the sharing, dissemination and utilisation of evidence-based information through:

Strengthening evidence-gathering on sexual violence in mission areas: A sound strategy must be based on reliable data. Member states should close the existing data and evidence gap by conducting or commissioning studies on gender and conflict-related sexual violence and facilitate improved data collection and analysis. The establishment of a Regional Research and Documentation Centre for Women, Gender and Peacebuilding in the Great Lakes Region is one of the major activities of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) gender equality programme. The centre is part of UNESCO's programme promoting the human rights and status of women living in the Great Lakes region through the pursuit of policy-oriented research, consultations, networking and capacity-building for sustainable peace in the region.³² Building on the Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict launched at the UN General Assembly in 2013, the 2014 Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict initiated the International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict, setting out international standards on how to collect the strongest possible information and evidence, whilst protecting witnesses, to increase convictions and deter future perpetrators.³³ It guides practitioners on how to obtain evidence for sexual violence crimes. Stronger evidence lessens the burden on survivors to testify as the basis of prosecutions, as well as ensures that victims are not further stigmatised or traumatised by going through trials. The UN can contribute by working with local organisations to strengthen understanding of such instruments at the community level.

Utilisation of best practices and lessons learnt: The UN should further ensure that peacekeeping missions build on successful efforts and lessons learnt to facilitate increased participation of local women in peace processes at all levels. This should be strengthened by studies and applied research on the key challenges and successes of the different interventions that seek to respond to gender dimensions in peacekeeping. These experiences are also available in the work already being undertaken by local and community organisations and can be used to strengthen the gathering and application of lessons learnt.

Support policy processes for implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 by:

Strengthening political leadership on the full implementation of UNSCR 1325 and its subsequent resolutions: High-level political leadership across the whole UN system should be visible and operational in responding to issues of women, peace and security. Greater efforts to ensure UN and other regional actors' accountability in implementing UNSCR 1325 must accompany enhanced leadership efforts by UN actors. The UN DPKO and, by extension, the United Nations Security Council need to work to overcome the political and implementation hurdles they face in fully implementing the women, peace and security agenda, as well as the full complement of their obligations in terms of ensuring international peace and security. Briefings from senior UN officials, including special envoys and special representatives, must include analyses and recommendations on women's security, health and economic concerns and engagement in key political processes and decision-making forums, and women's access to services and protection. They must also reflect on information in key reports, and fill in gaps in information not provided in reports, particularly on women's participation. In this regard, briefers should report explicitly on the implementation of the women, peace and security components of the mandate – including successes, challenges, failures and plans for further implementation, as well touching on ways of engaging with local organisations.

Establishing a gender mainstreaming mentorship programme: This programme will primarily target military, civilian and police peacekeepers with information on how to work with local women and communities at large in responding to gender issues. This could benefit from the experiences of the UN Police International Network of Female Peacekeepers, a setup which focuses on increasing professionalism through training and sharing expertise on international policing and issues affecting local women. The mentorship programme, hosted by the DPKO, will also be a platform for sharing lessons learnt and best practices in terms of engaging with local communities on gender issues based on different mission experiences.

Conclusion

Gender mainstreaming is no longer optional. Conflict impacts the social fabric of a community, undermining women and men's equitable access to

resources, changing the opportunities available to women and men, and influencing the ways in which men and women relate to each other at household and community level. Achieving gender equality is, therefore, not just an issue for women and girls; it requires the participation of everyone, including men and boys, and is the responsibility of all stakeholders in a community, including peacekeepers. In addition to the physical and psychological trauma suffered by survivors, sexual violence adds to ethnic, sectarian and other divisions, further entrenching conflict and instability. Addressing inequalities – including gender inequalities – and the vulnerabilities of women is the first step in preventing sexual violence. Among the key strategies needed to address challenges in implementing UNSCR 1325 in African peace operations is to increase opportunities for women and civil society organisations at local level to work on protecting the rights of women. In addition to increased funding, capacity-building, partnership and cooperation with civil society and community actors is key. Cooperation among different professionals involved in managing cases of sexual violence of women is essential to avoiding re-victimisation in judicial processes. There is still work to be done by the UN to increase the numbers of women in peacekeeping missions and to maintain a gender balance in force generation. While this is very important, it should be run concurrently with recommendations that address the needs of local women in peace operations environment through collaborative and inclusive approaches.

Endnotes

- 1 The authors would like to acknowledge the support of Petronella Mugoni, Senior Programme Officer in the Knowledge Production Department at the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) for her support to get this brief published.
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