

Review on the future of all forms of UN peace operations

Open call for contributions

Annex 1: Guiding questions for the open call for contributions

1. What are the main challenges confronting peace operations today and what challenges are expected to be faced by peace operations in the future?

The GSS Lab examines how gender dynamics within security sector institutions shape the effectiveness, legitimacy, and inclusivity of peace operations, helping to identify both current and emerging challenges. A key present challenge is sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) perpetrated by peacekeepers (Karim & Beardsley 2016, Karim & Beardsley 2017). which undermines mission legitimacy, erodes local trust, and complicates operations by forcing the UN to balance accountability with the continued need for personnel from troop and police contributing countries (TPCCs) (Torres-Beltran & Mailhot 2024). Our work shows that effective, targeted training for deployed personnel is critical to both preventing SEA and ensuring accountability when it occurs (Karim et al. 2025; Donnelly et al. 2025). However, our work also considers how zero-tolerance policies regarding sexual relationships between peacekeepers and civilians may adversely affect women's ability to effectively participate in a peace operation and that it has consequences on sexual harassment among peacekeepers (Saad et al. 2023). This research highlights how well-intentioned policies on sexual conduct can unintentionally perpetuate gender segregation, foster hyper-sexualized environments, and marginalize female peacekeepers, offering new insights into the unintended consequences of current peacekeeping regulations (Saad et al. 2023). One of the most pernicious effects of SEA is that it can increase rape by local men (Torres et al. 2025) because it increases the cost of transactional sex and causes reinterpretations of what relationships mean in places where there are higher levels of SEA.

Looking ahead, our research also highlights how climate-related shocks, including rising temperatures, severe droughts, and water shortages, pose growing operational challenges. Such conditions reduce peacekeepers' ability to protect civilians, affect logistics, and challenge morale and health (Attai et al. 2025). By analyzing these intersecting challenges through a gendered lens, our research provides insights into how peace operations can adapt to protect civilians, maintain legitimacy, and remain effective in increasingly complex and volatile environments.

Finally, our research has shown that African UN peacekeepers face distinct challenges transitioning home after deployment from peace operations, suggesting that UN operations and TPCCs need to adapt to administrative and capacity challenges to support transitioning peacekeepers (Karim et al. 2024b).

2. How could UN peace operations adapt in response to current and future challenges (e.g. in terms of political and substantive work, mandates, operational and administrative requirements, and capacities)?

Our research provides evidence-based insights into how UN peace operations can adapt to current and future challenges. Our findings show that missions are more effective and legitimate when gender-integration within TPCCs is treated as a core operational priority. For example, our research on women's participation in peacekeeping and security institutions demonstrate that inclusive recruitment and retention strategies, such as targeted training, transparent promotion systems, and family support policies, strengthen operational capacity and build trust with local communities (Karim et al. 2025a)

Our work on accountability for SEA highlights the importance of robust, independent reporting mechanisms, alongside integrating gender indicators and sex-disaggregated data into monitoring and evaluation systems (Karim et al. 2024a). It also highlights the need for gender parity within peacekeeping forces, as our research has found that a higher number of female peacekeepers contributes to fewer SEA allegations during a mission (Karim & Beardsley 2016, Karim & Beardsley 2017).

We also find that to reduce misconduct, there must be a focus on the organizational culture of the security forces. Our research shows that those that are more hypermasculine (individuals or units) are more prone to misconduct. We also, however, find that when security force personnel face emasculating circumstances, they are more likely to accept misconduct (Huber, Pruett & Karim 2025). This means that TCC/PCC selection criteria for deployment should include these elements in the evaluation of the overall criteria.

Finally, our research on peacekeepers' experiences in climate affected-contexts shows the need for adaptive training and specialized equipment to enhance protections for personnel operating in volatile and extreme weather conditions (Attai et al. 2025). Together, these findings identify practical steps for missions to remain agile, legitimate, and responsive in evolving operational environments.

3. What could UN peace operations be expected and mandated to do in the future? Under what conditions are UN peace operations least likely to be effective in achieving their Objectives?

Research from the GSS lab sheds light on the evolving scope of UN peace operations and the conditions under which they succeed or falter. Our work shows that missions with mandates for active enforcement and oversight, rather than passive monitoring, are more likely to see peace agreements implemented (Mailhot 2025a). We also find that when missions are explicitly tasked with advancing thematic agenda, such as the WPS agenda, they can shape the content of peace agreements themselves (Mailhot 2025c). Civilians in post-conflict countries also prefer

more robust missions by the UN that focus on security (Mailhot and Karim 2025). This means that there is still demand for robust-mandated missions.

Other GSS lab research highlights how emerging challenges, such as climate-related shocks, are already limiting operational capacity and protection effectiveness in the field (Attai et al. 2025), suggesting that environmental volatility will be a defining factor in the mandates and operational scope of future missions.

Our research also identifies the conditions that make peace operations least effective. Local trust in missions, for example, can affect whether missions can successfully rebuild institutional legitimacy (Karim 2019, Mailhot 2025b). SEA significantly reduces trust in missions and can contribute to local rape (Torres et al. 2025). We have also found that while training on SEA can improve awareness among peacekeepers, it does not meaningfully reduce misconduct without strong accountability systems, and such misconduct undermines mission credibility (Donnelly et al. 2025). Climate-related disruptions compound these challenges by reducing mobility, morale, and logistical efficiency (Attai et al. 2025). Together, these findings show that mission effectiveness is not determined solely by mandate scope, but also by local perceptions, internal accountability, and the ability to operate under increasingly volatile environmental conditions.

4. What could be the role of partnerships, with regional organizations, international financial institutions, or other actors, in future UN peace operations? What are the opportunities and challenges presented by partnerships, and what principles should underpin them?

Strategic partnerships between the UN, regional organizations, and other actors can enhance peace operation effectiveness by leveraging complementary strengths. For example, our work shows that when mandates are specialized and activities are deliberately divided among international missions, such as police reform by one actor and judicial reform by another, more provisions in peace agreements receive enforcement, increasing the likelihood of successful implementation (Mailhot and Diehl 2025). This division of labor can improve coverage of complex reform processes that single organizations may not be able to address alone.

Our studies also demonstrate that partnerships are most effective when coordination is matched with careful attention to mission reputation and public perceptions. Evidence from Bosnia and Kosovo, for example, show that variation in how different missions are perceived can influence trust in the domestic institutions they support, shaping long-term post conflict governance outcomes (Mailhot 2023, 2025). These findings underscore both the opportunity and challenge of partnerships as they can extend capacity of peace operations but they also require shared principles on legitimacy, inclusivity, and accountability to maximize their collective impact.

5. Please share any additional observations that may benefit the Review

Lab citations:

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