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Via Email: unpeaceoperationsreview@un.org

Attn: UN Peace Operations Review Team

United Nations Secretariat

Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA)

Department of Peace Operations (DPO)

Subject: UNITED SIKHS Submission for the Review on the Future of All Forms of United Nations Peace Operations (Action 21, Pact for the Future)

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I. Introduction

UNITED SIKHS is a civil society, nonprofit organization rooted in the Sikh principles of equality and justice, working globally on humanitarian relief, human and civil rights advocacy, and community development. Since 1999, our organization has provided food, medical services, trauma support, and rebuilding assistance to areas affected by natural and man-made disasters, with a particular focus on the most vulnerable, including women and children.

UNITED SIKHS commends the UN's effort to conduct this strategic review under Action 21, Paragraph 42(2) of the Pact for the Future (UNGA A/RES/79/1). We are honored to submit this memorandum, which is informed by our humanitarian work and expert studies and aligns with the Pact's imperatives on gender equality, youth inclusion, human rights, and justice. Our submission argues that a future of truly effective and sustainable peace operations must place the

protection and empowerment of women and children at its very core, recognizing them not merely as victims, but as the architects of a peaceful future.

II. Summary:

The undersigned welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Secretary-General's review on the future of United Nations peace operations, as mandated by Action 21 of the Pact for the Future. This review is critical to reimagine peace operations not only as instruments of stability, but as platforms for inclusive transformation.

A. Inclusion as a Cornerstone of Effective Peace Operations

We strongly urge the Review Team to prioritize the full, equal, and meaningful inclusion of women and young people at all levels of peace operations, strategic planning, field deployment, leadership, and evaluation. This is not merely a normative aspiration; it is a proven operational imperative.

Women's participation enhances peace durability: Research by UN Women and the Council on Foreign Relations demonstrates that peace agreements involving women are 35% more likely to last at least fifteen years.

Youth are not passive beneficiaries, they are peacebuilders: The UN Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015) recognizes youth as critical agents in conflict prevention and resolution. However, their involvement remains under-institutionalized.

B. Persistent Gaps

Despite decades of advocacy and normative frameworks, representation remains inadequate. As of 2025, women comprise only 10% of uniformed peacekeeping personnel, with even lower representation in leadership roles. Youth participation is often tokenistic, lacking structural support and sustained funding.

C. Strategic Recommendations

To ensure peace operations are fit for purpose in a rapidly evolving global landscape, we recommend:

1. Codify Inclusion in Mandate: mandates must explicitly require gender and youth representation in mission planning and execution.
2. Invest in Inclusion by allocating dedicated, sustained funding for gender-responsive and youth-led peacebuilding initiatives.
3. Elevate Local Voices by systematically engaging women's groups and youth organizations in host countries as co-designers of peace operations, not solely as consultees.

4. Weigh in on Importance by developing and publishing robust metrics on gender and youth participation, with accountability mechanisms across all missions.

The future of peace operations must reflect the future of peace itself: inclusive, participatory, and locally grounded. Women and young people are not peripheral actors, they are central to the legitimacy, effectiveness, and sustainability of peace efforts. The Pact for the Future must mark a decisive shift from rhetoric to action.

We stand ready to support the United Nations in realizing this vision.

III. The Centrality of Women and Children in Peace and Security

The UN's commitment to women, peace, and security, anchored in landmark Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) and its subsequent resolutions, recognizes the disproportionate impact of conflict on women and girls and the vital, yet often unrealized, role they play in peacebuilding.

Similarly, the work of the UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict highlights the need to protect children and prevent their recruitment into armed groups, a critical step in breaking cycles of violence. Despite these normative frameworks, a significant gap persists between policy and practice.

IV. Building Peaceful, Just, and Inclusive Societies

The Pact for the Future sheds light on transparent institutions and accessible justice as cornerstones of peace. Yet, women and children remain the most affected by the root causes of conflict, including displacement, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), poverty, and lack of access to education and employment, while being systematically excluded from the very mechanisms intended to deliver peace and justice. As a UN Women study notes, in 2023, women made up only 5% of negotiators and 9% of mediators in peace and ceasefire agreements [^1].

Without their full participation, peace processes risk being incomplete, unjust, and ultimately unsustainable.

The full and equal participation of women is not an act of charity but a strategic necessity. Their lived experiences and deep community trust are critical to designing inclusive, lasting peace.

They bring essential perspectives that are more apt to lead to durable solutions. For children, their protection and reintegration into society are foundational to preventing a new generation from being dismantled by conflict. Their recovery from trauma and access to education are the first steps toward rebuilding a future free from the plague of violence.

V. Protecting Civilians and Strengthening Peace Operations

Despite mandates to protect civilians and ensure accountability, peace operations frequently fail to prioritize the specific needs of women and children. Mandates are often fragmented, and civil society engagement is minimal. This gap is especially damaging as women and children are disproportionately affected by violence, with women and girls accounting for 95% of reported cases of sexual violence in conflict areas [^2]. Their absence in mission planning and oversight limits the effectiveness of protection strategies, particularly in addressing SGBV, displacement, and trauma recovery.

Women-led and youth-led organizations are often the first responders in crises, possessing the deep community trust and contextual knowledge that is imperative for effective protection. By formally integrating these groups into mission structures—as protection partners, monitors, and dialogue facilitators, peace operations can build more responsive, inclusive, and accountable mechanisms that fulfill the spirit and intent of the Pact. This requires investing in education, leadership development, digital access, and safe civic spaces for women and children in all Member States. It is also essential to remove legal and cultural barriers to their participation and to create formal, well-resourced mechanisms for women and youth to engage directly in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of peace operations.

VI. The Role of Peacebuilding in Reaching Underserved Communities

Peacebuilding in fragile states and underdeveloped countries must move beyond national-level institutions and engage directly with the most vulnerable populations.

Communities affected by conflict often suffer from a complete collapse of social and economic infrastructure, leading to a breakdown of trust in public institutions. For peace to be sustainable, it should resonate at the grassroots level, and be targeted, particularly, at those who have been historically marginalized.

VII. Addressing Systemic Inequalities

Conflict is often rooted in deep-seated inequalities and injustices. Peacebuilding, therefore, must be a process of social and economic transformation that directly addresses these root causes. This proposed strategy signifies at its core:

- A. Targeted Aid and Development: In post-conflict societies, marginalized groups, including ethnic and religious minorities, displaced populations, and rural communities, often have limited access to basic services like healthcare, education, and clean water. Peacebuilding efforts must prioritize rebuilding infrastructure and providing services in a way that is equitable and addresses past disparities. For example, the World Bank notes that in 2024, 75% of acutely food-insecure people live in fragile and conflict-affected situations, highlighting the direct link between conflict and poverty[^1].
- B. Inclusive Economic Recovery Peace operations should support economic recovery programs that provide employment and livelihood opportunities for women and youth.

This reduces their vulnerability to recruitment by armed groups and empowers them to become economic catalysts for peace. Failure to accomplish this task can exacerbate tensions and Pidgeon-hole communities into cycles of poverty and violence^[2].

VIII. The Crucial Role of Civil Society

In underdeveloped and post-conflict contexts, where state institutions may be weak, corrupt, or nonexistent, civil society organizations (CSOs) often fill the void. They are essential to peacebuilding because they:

- A. **Provide Essential Services:** CSOs, especially community-based organizations, often deliver critical humanitarian aid and social services, acting as a lifeline to sustain the viability of communities. This can include trauma support for women and children, informal education, and health services that the state cannot provide^[3].
- B. **Build Social Cohesion:** By bringing together diverse groups for common projects, such as rebuilding a school or establishing a community garden, CSOs can help to mend social fabrics frayed by conflict. This "community-based approach" builds trust and a sense of shared ownership, which are foundational to long-term peace^[4].
- C. **Serve as a Link between Local and International Actors:** Local CSOs possess a true understanding of the conflict's dynamics and the specific requirements of their communities. They can serve as a vital bridge between international peace operations and the local population, ensuring that interventions are culturally sensitive and relevant. However, past peacebuilding efforts have often been "top-down," failing to sufficiently empower these local actors, which can undermine the legitimacy and sustainability of the entire process^[5].

IX. Recommendations for a Women and Children-Centered Approach to Peacebuilding: Prioritize and Protect Women Peacekeepers

A transformative agenda for UN peace operations must embed the safety and empowerment of women and children into every phase of mission design and implementation. This requires a shared ethical duty from both the UN and Member States to ensure their protection, participation, and dignity.

Increasing the number of women peacekeepers is a critical step, but it is far from sufficient. As of early 2025, women account for only about 10% of uniformed UN peacekeeping personnel, with just 8.8% in military roles ^[2]. We must address the persistent barriers they face, including gender stereotypes, lack of appropriate equipment and facilities, and the risk of sexual

harassment as well as assault from within their own ranks [³]. The UN and Member States must:

1. Enforce Zero-Tolerance Policies: Implement and strictly enforce policies against sexual exploitation and abuse by all peacekeeping personnel, with transparent and accountable redress mechanisms for victims.
2. Provide Gender-Sensitive Equipment and Training: Ensure that all military and police personnel receive gender-responsive training and have access to equipment and facilities designed to meet their needs.
3. Support Women's Leadership: Actively promote women to senior leadership and decision-making roles within missions, challenging the gendered assumptions that often relegate them to support roles [⁴].
4. Empower Women and Children as Agents of Change: The most sustainable peace is one built and owned by the communities it serves. Women and children must be seen as partners, not merely as beneficiaries.
5. Establish Women and Youth Advisory Panels: Mandate the creation of Women and Youth Advisory Panels in every mission to provide direct, institutionalized input on planning, operations, and evaluation.
6. Integrate Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Align mission activities with the SDGs, especially Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and Goal 5 (Gender Equality). This includes supporting education, health, and economic initiatives that specifically empower women and children.
7. Support Local Peace Initiatives: Shift resources and authority to locally led civic education, trauma healing, and reconciliation programs. This approach recognizes that women often lead grassroots peace efforts and that children are key to breaking intergenerational cycles of violence.
8. Adapt to Emerging Threats with a Gender Lens New domains of conflict, such as cyber warfare and climate-induced instability, disproportionately affect women and children, making them more vulnerable to disinformation, displacement, and exploitation.
9. Counter Disinformation with Community Engagement: Develop strategic communications and counter-disinformation capacities in partnership with local women and youth-led groups, who can effectively combat false narratives within their communities.
10. Address Climate-Induced Vulnerabilities: Integrate climate-informed strategies and early warning systems into mission mandates. This includes supporting environmental peacebuilding and natural resource mediation, with an emphasis on protecting women and children who are often the first displaced by environmental crises.

X. Opportunities for UNITED SIKHS Engagement

UNITED SIKHS stands prepared to support UN peace operations by providing:

- A. Trained Humanitarian Volunteers: Our cadres, rooted in the Sikh values of equality and justice, have extensive grassroots experience and can assist in the provision of food, medical services, and trauma support to women and children.

- B. Community-Based Mediation: We offer mediation and protection models rooted in Sikh teachings that are respectful of local cultures and social dynamics, facilitating dialogue and reconciliation.
- C. Youth Outreach and Civic Mobilization: We can support efforts to engage local youth, particularly women and girls, in civic mobilization for peace, justice, and participatory governance. We also endorse the creation of a UN Youth Peace Corps, a global network of young peacebuilders aligned with the Pact's aim for sustained youth engagement.

XI. Conclusion

The future of UN peace operations depends on their ability to move beyond traditional, male-centric models and to whole-heartedly embrace an approach centered on the rights, protection, and empowerment of women and children. This must be coupled with a fundamental shift toward localized peacebuilding that actively involves and empowers civil society and underserved communities. By placing women, children, and their communities at the epicenter of peacebuilding, the UN can finally secure a just and lasting peace for all.

We consent to the public release of this submission.

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