

# GENDER, PEACEKEEPING, AND CHILD SOLDIERS:

## Training and Research in Implementation of the Vancouver Principles

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### ABSTRACT

Since the passage of UN Security Council resolution 1325, there has been a growing focus on the involvement of women in peacekeeping operations. Ambitious UN targets, the Vancouver Principles, and the Canadian government's Elsie Initiative all aim to support the increased inclusion of uniformed women in peacekeeping missions. This article discusses three areas in which the Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative (Dallaire Initiative) is working to support Vancouver Principle (VP) 11 through the training of women security sector actors, training on gendered dimensions of the recruitment and use of child soldiers and SGBV against child soldiers, and through research on how gender matters in peacekeeping operations. Based on these experiences and an engagement with the academic literature, it makes a number of policy recommendations in support of VP 11.

Keywords: gender, peacekeeping, training, child soldiers, SGBV

## INTRODUCTION

This article discusses the work of the Dallaire Initiative in areas of research and training that focus on how gender matters in both child protection in peacekeeping missions and the recruitment and use of child soldiers as an example of the type of work needed to support Vancouver Principle 11. Of primary interest are the Dallaire Initiative's efforts to increase the participation of women in its courses, training content for peacekeepers on how the recruitment and use of child soldiers is gendered, and research that the Dallaire Initiative is undertaking on gender and child protection in peacekeeping. These issues are discussed in regards to the current state of knowledge on gender, peacekeeping, and child soldiers, drawing on a review of selected literature. The paper concludes with some recommendations for policy makers at the state and UN level concerned with peacekeeping training, the inclusion of women in the security sector, and research support in these areas based on the discussed literature and work of the Dallaire Initiative.

## GENDERED ISSUES IN CHILD RECRUITMENT AND PROTECTION

Drawing on a selection of the academic literature on the recruitment and use of child soldiers, and on peacekeeping, this section examines some of the key aspects of how both child recruitment and protection are gendered. In particular, the gender of children plays an important role in how and why children are recruited and used by armed groups and forces, and therefore it is critical to understand when attempting to prevent recruitment. Research on gender and peacekeeping has revealed the central role that gender plays in the conduct and impacts of peacekeeping missions, but has so far paid little attention to its role in child protection.

### *Gender and Recruitment*

Approaches to understanding child soldiery have long been gender-blind. The use of girls in conflict and the ways girls are impacted by conflict have been considered to be a private matter rather than one of public or political importance.<sup>1</sup> Because of inherent male-centric understandings of conflict, girls and their unique experiences are often neglected or silenced in research, policy, and practice. It is critical to understand that it is not circumstantial that girls are recruited by groups and armed forces. Girls are often considered to be essential actors within many armed groups due to the duality of their roles. They serve in all the same roles as boys, but also in ones specific to their gender. For example, when boy soldiers

<sup>1</sup> Dyan Mazurana and Khristopher Carlson, "The Girl Child and Armed Conflict: Recognizing and Addressing Grave Violations of Girls' Human Rights," in Expert Group Meeting on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination and Violence Against the Girl Child (*Expert Group Meeting on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination and Violence Against the Girl Child, Florence: Division for the Advancement of Women, 2006*), <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/elim-disc-viol-girlchild/ExpertPapers/EP.12%20Mazurana.pdf>.

return following frontline fighting or other tasks they are often given time to rest; however, girl soldiers who return from fulfilling similar duties are often met with other tasks such as cleaning, cooking, and responding to the demands of their “husbands”<sup>2</sup> This causes girls living in conflict situations to be intentionally sought out and recruited in order to achieve a “tactical advantage” and places girls in heightened situations of vulnerability.<sup>3</sup>

Another reason the recruitment of girls might be conducted for strategic purposes is for giving birth to children. This was common in the Lord’s Resistance Army, as girl children were intentionally impregnated and their children were viewed as the next generation of fighters for the armed group.<sup>4</sup> This was also an impetus for the recruitment of women and girls into ISIS.<sup>5</sup> It is thus viewed that girl children contribute to the longevity and sustainability of the armed groups’ efforts. The presence of girl soldiers also is sometimes perceived as a way to boost the morale of adult male soldiers in armed groups.<sup>6</sup> These perceived tactical and strategic advantages have caused certain armed groups to ensure girls are kept within their ranks, which can be further aided by gender-blind approaches to demobilization which focus only on boys. This was noted in 2001 when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone released 1,213 child soldiers, and despite the fact that 30% of their total forces consisted of girl child soldiers, only 15 of the children released were girls.<sup>7</sup>

Sexual violence is widespread in many major conflicts around the world, and can be used intentionally as a weapon by armed forces and groups.<sup>8</sup> Conflict makes children more vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence, particularly for those within the ranks of armed forces and groups. Rape is often used as a “tool” by armed groups to reinforce disproportionate power dynamics and fear into children.<sup>9</sup> No matter what role(s) the child

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- 2 M. Gustavsson, J. Oruut, and B. Rubenson, “Girl Soldiers with Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda Fighting for Survival: Experiences of Young Women Abducted by LRA,” *Children’s Geographies* 15, no. 6 (November 2, 2017): 690–702, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2017.1300233>.
  - 3 Mazurana and Carlson, “The Girl Child and Armed Conflict”; Myriam Denov and Alexandra Ricard-Guay, “Girl Soldiers: Towards a Gendered Understanding of Wartime Recruitment, Participation, and Demobilisation,” *Gender & Development* 21, no. 3 (2013): 473–88.
  - 4 Dyan Mazurana and Susan McKay, “Child Soldiers: What about the GIRLS?,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 57, no. 5 (September 2001): 30–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2001.11460490>.
  - 5 Norman Benotman and Nikita Malik, “The Children of Islamic State” (London: Quilliam Foundation, 2016).
  - 6 Jeannie Annan et al., “Civil War, Reintegration, and Gender in Northern Uganda,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 55, no. 6 (December 2011): 877–908, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002711408013>.
  - 7 Mazurana and McKay, “Child Soldiers.”
  - 8 Mazurana and Carlson, “The Girl Child and Armed Conflict”; Denov and Ricard-Guay, “Girl Soldiers.”
  - 9 Abigail Leibig, “Girl Child Soldiers in Northern Uganda: Do Current Legal Frameworks Offer Sufficient Protection?,” *Northwestern University Journal of International Human Rights* 3, no. 1 (2005), <https://>

is given in the armed force or group, whether armed or not, the likelihood of rape remains high.<sup>10</sup> Rape has a significant impact on the physical and mental health of children and increases chances of pregnancy in girls and exposure to sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>11</sup>

Mental and physical consequences from SGBV in childhood are long-term and can affect survivors for the remainder of their lives. It should be noted that both boys and girls are subjected to SGBV in the ranks of armed forces and groups. While girls face greater risk of sexual violence, increasing attention is being paid to SGBV that boys face in armed conflict.<sup>12</sup>

The power imbalance between child and adult soldiers, particularly between girls and men, poses a great risk for sexual exploitation and abuse. Sexual exploitation and abuse can be defined as one “profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another.”<sup>13</sup> It is important to note the plethora of ways that conflict increases the sexual and gender-based vulnerabilities of children, as peacekeepers and humanitarian workers are also known to participate in the exploitation and abuse of children, even while they are captives of an armed group.<sup>14</sup> This form of exploitation by peacekeepers and humanitarians shows the need for an increased understanding of gendered vulnerabilities in conflict, as well as a need for improved reporting mechanisms and safeguards for children. Education and training are important for addressing this; however there is urgent need for greater accountability for peacekeepers and other personnel who exploit and abuse children, and changes to military culture that are important drivers of abuse. Particularly, the form of militarized masculinity that is often dominant within the armed forces remains during peacekeeping deployments, and has been directly linked to abuses against women and children.<sup>15</sup>

### *Gender and Peacekeeping*

The Implementation Guidance for the Vancouver Principles notes that there are significant literatures on gender and peacekeeping, and on child soldiers, but little crossover between

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[scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/njihr/vol3/iss1/6/](https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/njihr/vol3/iss1/6/).

10 Mazurana and McKay, “Child Soldiers.”

11 Mazurana and McKay.

12 Mazurana and Carlson, “The Girl Child and Armed Conflict”; All Survivors Project, “Gender and Age Specific Responses Needed to Address Sexual Violence against Children in Armed Conflict” (Liechtenstein: All Survivors Project, 2019).

13 Mazurana and Carlson, “The Girl Child and Armed Conflict.”

14 Mazurana and Carlson.

15 Sandra Whitworth, *Men, Militarism, and UN Peacekeeping: A Gendered Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007); Olivera Simic, “Does the Presence of Women Really Matter? Towards Combating Male Sexual Violence in Peacekeeping Operations,” *International Peacekeeping* 17, no. 2 (April 2010): 188–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533311003625084>.

them.<sup>16</sup> Little seems to have changed in this areas since our colleagues wrote the same in 2016.<sup>17</sup> The area of research on child protection and the gender of peacekeepers that has received the most attention is on sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by peacekeepers, though research has not all been focused specifically on SEA against children.<sup>18</sup>

This presents an important gap in the available empirical evidence to support women in peacekeeping, which needs to be addressed through theoretically-informed research.<sup>19</sup> The UN has set ambitious targets to increase the proportion of women in uniformed components of peacekeeping missions.<sup>20</sup> However, current knowledge about the effect of approaching gender parity in peacekeeping missions is largely based on anecdotal evidence,<sup>21</sup> with some exceptions,<sup>22</sup> and essentialized conceptions of gender that see women as naturally more peaceful, cooperative, approachable, and so on.<sup>23</sup> Regardless of the effect of increased participation of women in peacekeeping, it is important to advocate for from a rights-based perspective, as women should have the equal right, both *de facto* and *de jure*, to serve in the security sector and on peacekeeping missions.<sup>24</sup>

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16 Government of Canada, Implementation Guidance for the Vancouver Principles (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2019), <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/dnd-mdn/documents/reports/2019/igvp-20190614.pdf>.

17 Roméo Dallaire, Shelly Whitman, and Sam Holland, "Innovation in the Prevention of the Use of Child Soldiers: Women in the Security Sector," *Prism* 6, no. 1 (2016): 165–77.

18 Simic, "Does the Presence of Women Really Matter?"; Julia Bleckner, "From Rhetoric to Reality: A Pragmatic Analysis of the Integration of Women into UN Peacekeeping Operations.," *Journal of International Peacekeeping* 17, no. 3–4 (2013): 337–60; Sabrina Karim and Kyle Beardsley, "Explaining Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Peacekeeping Missions: The Role of Female Peacekeepers and Gender Equality in Contributing Countries," *Journal of Peace Research* 53, no. 1 (January 2016): 100–115, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343315615506>.

19 Louise Olsson and Theodora-Ismene Gizelis, "Advancing Gender and Peacekeeping Research.," *International Peacekeeping* 21, no. 4 (August 8, 2014): 520–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2014.946742>.

20 Department of Peace Operations, "Summary: Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy 2018–2028" (New York: United Nations, 2019), <https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/uniformed-gender-parity-strategy-2018-2028-summary.pdf>.

21 Marta Ghittoni, Léa Lehouck, and Callum Watson, "Elsie Initiative for Women in Peace Operations: Baseline Study" (Geneva: DCAF, 2018), [https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/Elsie\\_GenderReport\\_2018\\_Final.pdf](https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/Elsie_GenderReport_2018_Final.pdf).

22 e.g., Sabrina Karim and Kyle Beardsley, *Equal Opportunity Peacekeeping: Women, Peace, and Security in Post-Conflict States*, *Oxford Studies in Gender and International Relations* (Oxford ; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

23 Sandra Biskupski-Mujanovic, "Smart Peacekeeping: Deploying Canadian Women for a Better Peace?," *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis* 74, no. 3 (September 2019): 405–21, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702019874791>.

24 Ghittoni, Lehouck, and Watson, "Elsie Initiative for Women in Peace Operations: Baseline Study."

Given the currently low proportion of women in peacekeeping missions, in the security sector more generally, and the resistance from some to deploying more women in all roles, it is important to understand how gender matters in the conduct of peacekeeping in order to deploy women where they can be most effective and to strategically argue for their increased participation. Alongside greater empirical knowledge on the issue, there needs to be greater political will to deploy more women to missions, and to deploy them where needed, not just to the safest locations.<sup>25</sup>

Research that the Dallaire Initiative has previously conducted indicates that gender does have an impact on child protection activities carried out by peacekeepers. Female peacekeepers interviewed in the DRC by the Dallaire Initiative, were more aware of how their gender affected their role, were approached more by women and children, and were more likely to see girl child soldiers as more than just “wives” of male combatants. Similar observations were reported by female military chaplains from the UK, Australia, and Canada.<sup>26</sup> However, this evidence remains anecdotal, and like other studies on gender on peacekeeping it is not easy to separate out whether the peacekeeper’s gender itself was responsible, or that women who were trained on gender awareness and engaging civilians were more likely to be deployed into such roles.<sup>27</sup> Because of the common, gendered conception that women are more approachable than men for women and children, this may cause male peacekeepers to avoid interactions with women and children, leaving it to their female colleagues.<sup>28</sup>

Consequently, the evidence suggests that gender does matter in child protection, as it does in other areas of peacekeeping implementation, but further research is needed to tease out the specifics in systematic ways. Both research and implementation in this area should be carried out with a view towards advancing women’s rights and improving the outcome of peacekeeping missions.

## SUPPORTING IMPLEMENTATION: THE DALLAIRE INITIATIVE’S APPROACH

The Dallaire Initiative views addressing the gendered dimensions of the recruitment and use of child soldiers as a key aspect of prevention, and as noted in the previous section

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25 Sabrina Karim and Kyle Beardsley, “Female Peacekeepers and Gender Balancing: Token Gestures or Informed Policymaking?,” *International Relations* 39, no. 4 (2013): 461–88.

26 Dallaire, Whitman, and Holland, “Innovation in the Prevention of the Use of Child Soldiers: Women in the Security Sector.”

27 Ghittoni, Lehouck, and Watson, “Elsie Initiative for Women in Peace Operations: Baseline Study.”

28 Sara Singleton and Anne Holohan, “The Case for ‘Trust Awareness’ as a Key Soft-Skill for Peacekeepers,” *Journal of International Peacekeeping* 21, no. 3–4 (April 28, 2017): 224–45, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18754112-02103003>.

has carried out some research in this area before. The organization is currently focused on improving the consideration of gender in the organization's work through several paths. It is ensuring that its most experienced instructors, both women and men, are well-versed in teaching about gender, peacekeeping, and the prevention of recruitment. A much-improved training module focused on SGBV is currently under development, and a review of existing training materials to improve how they address gender is being conducted. Consideration of gender and SGBV in armed conflict is a central component of current training work in Nigeria and South Sudan. Finally, the Dallaire Initiative has several ongoing research projects focused on gender, peacekeeping, and child recruitment, one of which is discussed below.

The Dallaire Initiative is currently contributing to the implementation of VP 11 in three main areas of the implementation guidance: through actively promoting the participation of women in our training programs, through content on gendered dimensions of the recruitment and use of child soldiers and on SGBV and children in our training curriculum, and through research on gender and child protection in peacekeeping missions.

#### *Women's Participation in Dallaire Initiative Courses*

The Dallaire Initiative aims to increase the participation of women throughout its security sector training. While this is challenging due to the low number of women in most security sector organizations, and especially in pre-deployment trainings that the Dallaire Initiative takes part in as the participants are already chosen by the troop contributor country, in other basic and training-of-trainers courses the Dallaire Initiative actively works towards achieving a gender balance in its courses. As well, the organization has previously run courses for women in the security sector in Sierra Leone in 2014 and Uganda in 2015,<sup>29</sup> and there are plans for more women-only courses over the coming years.

The current low number of women in the security sector globally, and in UN missions specifically, makes reaching gender parity in the Dallaire Initiative's courses challenging. While global data on women in the security sector is difficult to compile, as of November 2019 the proportion of women in the uniformed component of the UN's large missions ranged from 2% to 10%.<sup>30</sup> Many of the Dallaire Initiative's training participants are from predeployment trainings, where the cohort of participants is already set by the unit being deployed and many units have few to no women. Despite these challenges, 11.9% of the Dallaire Initiative's training participants since the first Dallaire Initiative course in 2009 have

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29 Dallaire, Whitman, and Holland, "Innovation in the Prevention of the Use of Child Soldiers: Women in the Security Sector."

30 Department of Peace Operations, "Gender Imbalance per Mission - Nov 19" (New York: United Nations, 2019), [https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/gender\\_statistics\\_november\\_2019.pdf](https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/gender_statistics_november_2019.pdf).

been women. Among basic and training-of-trainers courses where the organization has more influence over who is chosen to participate, the proportion of women rises to 15.9%. This illustrates that determined work to increase the proportion of women being trained for peacekeeping work can succeed through outside pressure. However, further work is required to achieve gender parity in Dallaire Initiative training.

### *Training on Gender, SGBV, and Recruitment and Use*

The Dallaire Initiative is working to address gendered vulnerabilities through its security sector training. The training highlights first and foremost that girls are used in conflict in a variety of ways, not only for sexual purposes or other roles linked to gender stereotypes such as being a cook or domestic worker, but also as fighters, porters, etc. An increased understanding of the ways children are recruited and used helps security sector actors to identify at-risk children and work to prevent their recruitment in the first place. This is where it is critical to challenge male-centric perceptions of conflict and to understand the intentionality of recruiting girls as well as boys. Dallaire Initiative training also includes a module on sexual and gender-based violence that educates on the increased vulnerabilities of both boy and girl children after recruitment takes place. It is critical to understand how sexual and gender-based violence impacts the mental and physical health of children during their time within armed groups and once they are demobilized. From a security sector approach, it is critical to emphasize how the recruitment and use of children poses a challenge for the security sector specifically due to the tactical and strategic reasons for their use.

### *Research on Gender and Child Protection in Peacekeeping*

To help address the gap in knowledge on gender and peacekeeping that was previously discussed, the Dallaire Initiative received a four-year Insight Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) to research how the gender of peacekeepers affects the conduct of child protection, especially with respect to preventing the recruitment and use of child soldiers. Research will be carried out with current and former peacekeepers, civil society actors, and people who were children during previous peacekeeping missions, with a focus on Sierra Leone, Rwanda, South Sudan, and Jordan. The outcomes of the research will be disseminated over the next three years in journal articles, policy briefings, blog posts, and other media, and through workshops and conferences with interested policy makers, security sector actors, civil society, and academics.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Based on the discussion in the literature review section, there are three main areas relevant for policy that should be addressed in support of VP 11 specifically, and for the

implementation of the Vancouver Principles in general. First, the current lack of rigorous empirical research on how women's participation in peacekeeping affects child protection activities in the mission should be addressed to improve the conduct of child protection. Second, the urgent need to prevent sexual and gender-based violence against children during armed conflict calls for ensuring that peacekeepers are adequately prepared to prevent SGBV during conflict and protect survivors. Finally, the continuing low participation of women in the uniformed components of most peacekeeping missions is an issue both of women's rights and of addressing the challenges facing peacekeeping missions. Below, some recommendations are made based on the previously discussed literature and the Dallaire Initiative's experience in these areas. They are primarily aimed at the UN and troop and police contributing countries.

This first area can be addressed through ongoing support of research by academics, civil society, and within the security sector on how gender matters in the conduct of peacekeeping. In addition to financial support for research projects, states that provide uniformed peacekeepers and the UN could consider facilitating access by researchers to peacekeepers for interviews, collecting gender-disaggregated data on where and in what roles peacekeepers serve, and including consideration of gendered experiences of peacekeepers in their monitoring, evaluation, and lessons learned processes.

The second area will require a mix of actions and policies, including better training for peacekeepers on how to understand, prevent, and respond to conflict related sexual violence against children, especially that perpetrated against child soldiers. In particular, it is critical that peacekeeping missions have sufficient personnel who are trained in how to properly interact with and care for child survivors of sexual violence, that these personnel are deployed to mission locations where they are most needed, and that missions have good relationships with civil society and international organization actors that provide trauma-sensitive demobilization, care, and reintegration for child soldiers who have survived sexual and gender-based violence. Changes to both accountability mechanisms in peacekeeping missions and the militarized culture that enables sexual exploitation and abuse are also urgently required and need sufficient political will, resources, and policy to address.

The third area has received more attention, with the UN establishing ambitious targets for increasing the participation of women in peacekeeping missions, and efforts such as the Elsie Initiative helping to address challenges in training and inclusion that will help deploy more uniformed women. These efforts need to be better premised on the normative basis for equal participation of women in peacekeeping, evidence-based on needed research discussed in the first gap, and addressing the exclusionary, masculine culture of most security sector

organizations that impedes the participation of women.<sup>31</sup>

## CONCLUSION

With the 20th anniversary of UN Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security happening this October, it is an important time to take stock of the progress over the past two decades on addressing the gendered aspects of armed conflict and the inclusion of women in peacekeeping. While there has been considerable progress in research, policy, advocacy, and inclusion, much remains to be done, and this work is as urgent as ever. In the face of ongoing armed conflict, the climate crisis, great power competition, and renewed attacks on women's rights, urgent action will be needed if Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality and 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions are to be achieved in the next decade by 2030. Vancouver Principle 11 provides an important political commitment when it comes to women in peacekeeping and addressing the gendered dimensions of the recruitment and use of child soldiers, and the Dallaire Initiative's work on training, preventing sexual violence against children during armed conflict, and conducting research in this area provide important contributions to this agenda.

## NOTES

This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. We want to thank the two anonymous peer reviewers and our colleagues at the Dallaire Initiative for their valuable suggestions to improve the article.

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31 Elisabeth Braw, "Norway's Radical Military Experiment," *Foreign Affairs*, January 19, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/norway/2017-01-19/norways-radical-military-experiment>; Ghittoni, Lehouck, and Watson, "Elsie Initiative for Women in Peace Operations: Baseline Study."