

Are Missions Delivering on Gender-Responsive Peace Operations? Lessons from South Sudan and Somalia

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Cover Photo: Displaced women in Juba call more support network for protection, September 13, 2024. Isaac Billy/UNMISS.

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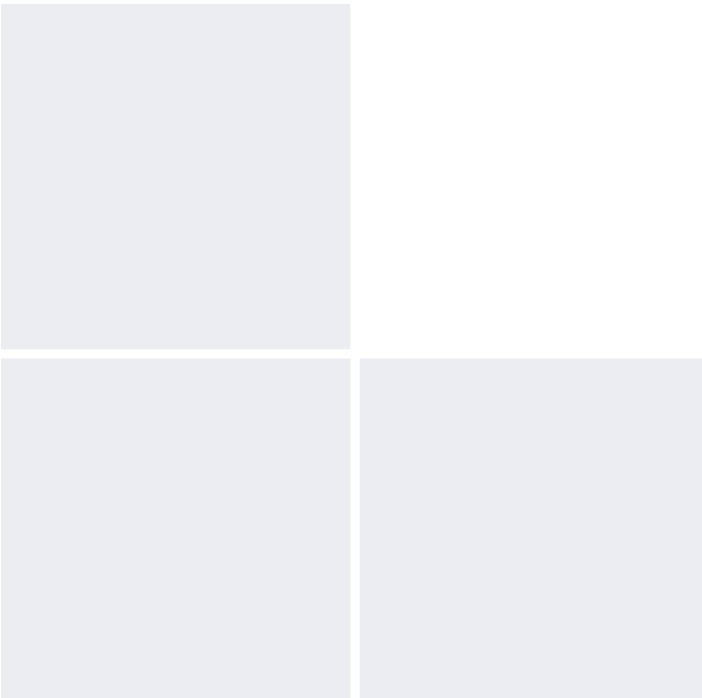
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CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| Abbreviations | iii |
| Executive Summary | v |
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Mission Contexts in South Sudan and Somalia..... | 2 |
| UNMISS in South Sudan | 2 |
| AMISOM and ATMIS in Somalia..... | 3 |
| Normative Commitments and Mandates | 3 |
| Mandates and Frameworks in UNMISS | 5 |
| Mandates and Frameworks in AMISOM/ATMIS..... | 6 |
| Institutional Design..... | 8 |
| Positioning of Gender Expertise in UNMISS..... | 8 |
| Positioning of Gender Expertise in AMISOM/ATMIS | 9 |
| Composition and Deployment | 10 |
| Women Peacekeepers in UNMISS..... | 10 |
| Women Peacekeepers in AMISOM/ATMIS..... | 10 |
| Leadership and Command Climate | 11 |
| Community Engagement..... | 12 |
| Conclusion and Recommendations | 13 |

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---------|--|
| AMISOM | African Union Mission in Somalia |
| ATMIS | African Union Transition Mission in Somalia |
| AU | African Union |
| CIMIC | Civil-military cooperation |
| CRF | Continental Results Framework on Women, Peace and Security |
| DPO | Department of Peace Operations |
| GBV | Gender-based violence |
| NAP | National Action Plan |
| POC | Protection of civilians |
| PSC | Peace and Security Council |
| R-ARCSS | Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan |
| SEA | Sexual exploitation and abuse |
| SGBV | Sexual and gender-based violence |
| SRSG | Special representative of the secretary-general |
| TCC | Troop-contributing country |
| UNMISS | United Nations Mission in South Sudan |
| WPS | Women, peace, and security |

Executive Summary

Gender-responsive peacekeeping and peace support operations are designed and implemented in ways that recognize gendered differences and inequalities, and advance gender equality and the rights, protection, and participation of all genders as a core part of mandate delivery. Gender responsiveness is about more than adding gender expertise or meeting representation targets; it is about integrating a gender lens across planning, tasking, and resource allocation.

The normative foundation for gender-responsive peace operations has strengthened considerably over the past two decades. Yet this normative guidance does not automatically translate into practice. Gender-related commitments only shape mission behavior when embedded in the operational instruments through which missions allocate resources, structure patrols, assign responsibilities, and evaluate performance. Evidence from the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and the African Union missions in Somalia (AMISOM and its successor, ATMIS) illustrates this gap. In both cases, commitment to gender-related norms ran ahead of implementation. The factors that determined whether gender commitments were realized had less to do with what mandates said than with how missions were organized to act on them.

The institutional placement of gender expertise has been a critical variable. In UNMISS, gender advisers sit within mission leadership and participate in senior decision-making forums, allowing gender analysis to inform early warning, patrol planning, and protection measures before operational decisions are finalized. In AMISOM and ATMIS, gender advisers were positioned downstream, confined largely to training, outreach, and reporting, and consulted only after plans had been drafted. This structural marginalization limited gender advisers' influence regardless of their individual capacity. The transition to ATMIS expanded the gender office but did not change the basic architecture: gender officers retained limited and informal authority within military command structures. Thus, effective implementation depended on dedicated individuals rather than institutionalized systems.

Force composition has similarly shaped gender responsiveness in both missions. Female peacekeepers can expand a mission's reach into communities where gender norms restrict interac-

tions between unrelated men and women, improving situational awareness and trust with local populations. Yet women are heavily under-represented among uniformed personnel in both missions (roughly 10 percent in UNMISS and 5 percent in AMISOM/ATMIS). Just as important as representation is whether women are deployed in roles and at ranks where their presence influences decisions and enables community access or confined to administrative and support functions.

Leadership has proved the most decisive factor in shaping missions' level of gender responsiveness. Without top-level advocacy, commitments to women, peace, and security risk existing on paper but not translating into practice. Committed leaders can convert mandate language into operational reality. In UNMISS, senior engagement with the mission's gender architecture enabled targeted protection adaptations, including adjustments to patrol routes and timing in response to women's accounts of where they faced the greatest risk. In AMISOM/ATMIS, where gender was treated primarily through the lens of compliance and reputation management following sexual exploitation and abuse scandals, gender-responsive practice remained fragile and dependent on individual initiative.

Gender-responsive community engagement is also important, both for protection and for legitimacy. Sustained engagement with local women generates early-warning intelligence and community cooperation that formal reporting channels cannot replicate. In both missions, however, this engagement was constrained, in AMISOM/ATMIS by a fortified posture that prioritized force protection over population-centric presence and in UNMISS by the limits of what even a well-structured mission can achieve in a volatile political environment.

In both missions, the core challenge is the gap between procedural responsiveness, meeting institutional requirements without changing practices, and transformative responsiveness, achieving visible shifts in mission operations and civilian protection. Gender responsiveness enhances the effectiveness and legitimacy of peace operations when missions move beyond formal compliance and embed a gender lens in the operational systems that shape how they understand and act within conflict environments.

Introduction

Gender-responsive peacekeeping operations are designed and implemented in ways that recognize and analyze gendered differences and inequalities and advance gender equality and the rights, protection, and participation of all genders as a core part of mandate delivery. Gender responsiveness is about more than adding gender expertise or training modules or meeting representation targets; it is about integrating a gender lens across planning, tasking, and resource allocation. Thus, gender responsiveness is central to missions' operational and political effectiveness.¹

This paper focuses on two missions: the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS, 2011–present) and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM, 2007–2022) and its successor, the AU Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS, 2022–2024). The paper explores how gender-responsive strategies are conceptualized, employed, and incorporated into these missions, drawing lessons about what works and what constrains progress. It aims to identify recurring patterns, structural constraints, and conditions that enable gender-responsive practices to enhance operational effectiveness and mission legitimacy.

In this analysis, the paper does not directly compare the gender responsiveness of the two missions given the differences in their mandates, operational posture, and institutional context. Instead, it examines how each mission has interpreted and operationalized gender-responsive peacekeeping across key operational domains: mandates, institutional design, force composition and deployment, leadership, and community engagement. It also looks at the extent to which these practices have contributed to mission effectiveness.

The lessons presented are, therefore, organized around mechanisms rather than outcomes. The

paper examines how missions translate frameworks and mandates into practice, how they integrate or marginalize gender expertise through their institutional design, how the gender composition and deployment of personnel can affect access and trust, and how leadership and community engagement determine whether gender commitments lead to tangible action. The analysis distinguishes between procedural responsiveness (meeting institutional requirements without changing practices) and transformative responsiveness (achieving visible shifts in mission operations, civilian protection, and engagement with political and social actors).

The paper argues that gender responsiveness enhances the effectiveness and legitimacy of peace operations when missions move beyond formal compliance and embed a gender lens in the operational systems that shape how they understand and act within conflict environments.

While gender refers to the socially constructed relationships, roles, and power dynamics among women, men, boys, girls, and gender-diverse individuals, this paper focuses on women. This is not a conflation of gender and women but a recognition that in South Sudan and Somalia, women and girls disproportionately suffer from conflict-related sexual violence, displacement, early marriage, and exclusion from decision-making. By foregrounding women's experiences while examining the gendered systems that shape mission behavior, the paper treats women's security as a diagnostic lens for assessing whether peace operations are genuinely gender-responsive in practice, not just in rhetoric.

The analysis draws on semi-structured interviews with over thirty key informants from UNMISS, AMISOM/ATMIS, host-state governments, and host communities conducted in person and online in 2025.² These interviews were supplemented by a desk review of mission mandates and gender policy documents.

Gender responsiveness is about more than adding gender expertise or training modules or meeting representation targets; it is about integrating a gender lens across planning, tasking, and resource allocation.

¹ Drawn from definition provided in the UN Department of Peace Operations' (DPO) Gender-Responsive United Nations Peacekeeping Operations Policy, 2024.

² In South Sudan, interviews were conducted with representatives from national and state-level institutions, senior officials from UNMISS, local women's groups, and various civil society organizations. In Somalia, interviews were conducted with federal and regional government stakeholders; former and current officials from AMISOM and ATMIS, including gender focal points and officers; and community actors, including women's civil society organizations in Morgadishu. ATMIS was replaced by the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) in January 2025. Ethical clearance for the research was obtained from the Institute for Security Studies (ISS).

Mission Contexts in South Sudan and Somalia

Peace operations are often assessed against ambitious mandates that exceed what they can realistically deliver in fragile, politically contested environments. Assessing mission effectiveness therefore requires examining the political and conflict contexts in which they operate and the constraints these environments impose on mandate implementation. In both South Sudan and Somalia commitment to norms, quotas, national action plans, and international obligations related to gender have run far ahead of implementation, which has been constrained by factors including entrenched patriarchal governance, limited political will, weak institutional capacity,

insecurity, and uneven societal buy-in.

UNMISS in South Sudan

The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), established in 2011 following South Sudan's independence, has operated in one of the world's most fragile environments, shaped by recurring civil wars, political instability, and mass displacement. Its mandate centers on protecting civilians, monitoring human rights, and supporting the peace process, including the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS). Despite operating with over 18,000 uniformed personnel at its peak,³ the mission's effectiveness has been constrained by limited host-state consent, ongoing armed clashes, and widespread human rights violations.⁴

Box 1. Adoption and implementation of gender-related commitments in South Sudan

South Sudan has experienced protracted conflict for over half a century, and its government has struggled to implement reforms or provide adequate protection for vulnerable populations. Women and girls have been disproportionately affected, with the majority of women having experienced some form of gender-based violence in some conflict-affected sites.⁵ Patriarchy and stereotypes around masculinity have masked the reality of male survivors thereby excluding men and boys from survivor-centric responses and silencing and reinforcing stigma and invisibility surrounding their victimhood.⁶

South Sudan has enacted significant formal commitments related to gender. The 2011 Transitional Constitution instituted a 25 percent quota for women's representation across the government. This was later raised to 35 percent by the 2018 R-ARCSS. In the wake of this quota, more women were appointed to senior positions, though women's representation has since declined and remains below 35 percent in key institutions such as the National Elections Commission.⁷ As of 2025, women held approximately 32 percent of seats in the Transitional National Legislature.⁸ South Sudan adopted its first National Action Plan (NAP) on women, peace, and security in 2015 and its second NAP in 2023.⁹

These instruments have not fundamentally altered the structural conditions constraining women's political power. Quotas and policy frameworks have expanded descriptive representation without dismantling patriarchal governance, militarized political settlements, or elite bargaining practices that marginalize women from decision-making. Implementation of the first NAP was severely disrupted by renewed conflict in 2016, while the second NAP continues to face capacity constraints, weak enforcement, and limited political buy-in. Gender reforms in South Sudan remain vulnerable to reversal and elite capture, illustrating

³ UNMISS, "UNMISS Facts and Figures," available at <https://unmiss.unmissions.org/en/unmiss-facts-and-figures>.

⁴ Allard Duursma, Sara Lindberg Bromley, and Aditi Gorur, "The Impact of Host-State Consent on the Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping," *Civil Wars* 26, no. 1 (2024).

⁵ Mary Ellsberg et al., "No Safe Place: Prevalence and Correlates of Violence against Conflict-Affected Women and Girls in South Sudan," *PLoS ONE* 15, no. 10 (2020).

⁶ Federico Borre, "We Don't Let What Happened Define Us: Male Survivors in South Sudan Speak Out," Global Survivors Fund, July 15, 2025.

⁷ Alan Clement, "Women Lose Ground Across South Sudan's Government as Peace Deal Commitments Falter," *One Citizen Daily*, January 1, 2026.

⁸ IPU Parline, "South Sudan," available at <https://data.ipu.org/parliament/SS/SS-LC01/data-on-women/>.

⁹ Government of South Sudan, "South Sudan National Action Plan 2015–2020 on UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security and Related Resolutions," 2015; UN, "South Sudan Validates Second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security," March 22, 2023.

that formal commitments are insufficient without sustained political will, institutional accountability, and security sector reform.¹⁰

Civil society actors have played a crucial role in advocating for gender justice and legal reform, pushing for the adoption of the stalled Anti-GBV (Sexual Offences) Bill and the implementation of transitional justice frameworks like the Women's Charter.¹¹ In addition to this legal advocacy, they have worked to shift gender norms through activities such as gender-sensitive journalism, peacebuilding radio dramas, and street art.¹² They have also engaged in consultations around South Sudan's NAP, cooperated with the GBV and Juvenile Court in Juba, and supported one-stop centers for survivors of GBV.¹³ While civil society organizations remain a critical force for accountability when formal structures stall, they have also faced repression when pressing on politically sensitive issues.¹⁴

AMISOM and ATMIS in Somalia

The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), deployed in 2007, operated for fifteen years as a counterinsurgency-focused peace support operation aimed at degrading al-Shabaab, stabilizing the Somali state, and enabling political reconciliation. Backed by UN logistical support and EU funding, AMISOM regained key territories and supported electoral and state-building processes but faced persistent challenges, including high casualties, the limited readiness of Somali forces, sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) scandals, and fragile local legitimacy. Over time, these reputational crises led the mission to develop compliance frameworks such as mechanisms for tracking civilian casualties and SEA hotlines.

In April 2022, AMISOM transitioned to the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), which is tasked with transferring security responsibility to Somali forces. ATMIS inherited both the operational gains and the structural weaknesses of AMISOM, including underresourced gender commitments and limited leverage over troop-

contributing countries.

Normative Commitments and Mandates

While gender-responsive peace operations require more than mandates and normative commitments, these are the starting point for operationalizing gender responsiveness. At the UN, the normative foundation for gender-responsive peace operations is the women, peace, and security (WPS) agenda, which consists of four pillars: participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery. Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) linked women's protection and participation to sustainable peace and called for gender perspectives to be integrated across all stages of conflict and peace processes.¹⁵ Subsequent resolutions elaborated on this framework. For instance, Resolution 1820 (2008) recognized sexual violence as a matter of international peace and security and called for enhancing the ability of peacekeeping operations to respond.

In practice, UN peacekeeping operations have

10 Santa J. Justin Ali, "Effectiveness of Women in Politics and Improving Gender Equality in South Sudan," Rift Valley Institute, April 2025; Kuol Garang and Doris Asante, "Beyond Participation: Rethinking Women's Engagement in South Sudan's Transitional Context," *African Security Review* (2026).

11 South Sudan Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare, "South Sudan Women's Charter," 2024; Equality Now, "Troubling Sexual Violence Cases Spark Pledge for Anti-GBV Taskforce in South Sudan," October 30, 2024; Michael Daniel, "Where Is the Bill? Advocates Question Ministry on Anti-GBV Progress," Eye Radio, May 5, 2026.

12 For instance, the Association for Media Development in South Sudan (AMDISS) hosted the launch of an artistic mural painted by the Anataban Campaign advocating for an end to girl child marriage in South Sudan. AMDISS, "AMDISS hosts the launching of an artistic mural painted by ANATABAN," Facebook, April 13, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/share/1aywqtJ3Tt/?mibextid=wwXlfr>.

13 The EVE Organisation for Women's Development (EOWD) has advocated for the adoption of gender equality frameworks at the regional level and used regional gendered mechanisms developed by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) to encourage a national adoption of the NAP. See: Kuol Garang and Doris Asante, "Beyond Participation: Rethinking Women's Engagement in South Sudan's Transitional Context," *African Security Review* (2026). See also: UN Development Programme (UNDP), "Fight against Gender Based Violence in South Sudan Continues," October 13, 2025.

14 CIVICUS, "South Sudan: Repression, Impunity, and the Urgent Need for Human Rights Monitoring," February 27, 2026.

15 Subsequent resolutions by the UN have deepened this structure: UNSCR 1820 (2008) recognised sexual violence as a tactic of war; 1888/1889 (2009) established institutional mechanisms; 2122 (2013) addressed participation gaps; 2242 (2015) promoted integration across countering violent extremism and counterterrorism; and 2493 (2019) reaffirmed the importance of implementation.

Box 2. Adoption and implementation of gender-related commitments in Somalia

Somalia has faced persistent conflict with the ongoing al-Shabaab insurgency and efforts to stabilize a fragile federal state. Gender equality remains elusive. Somalia ranks near the bottom of the UN Gender Inequality Index, reflecting persistent inequalities across reproductive health, political representation, and economic participation.¹⁶ Deeply embedded patriarchal structures enable the perpetuation of widespread female genital mutilation (FGM) and early marriage. Approximately 99 percent of Somali women between the ages of 15 and 49 have undergone FGM, and 45 percent are married before the age of 18.¹⁷

GBV is widespread in Somalia. Between 2021 and 2022, GBV cases rose sharply, with intimate partner violence, rape, sexual assault, and forced marriage among the most common incidents reported. Approximately 2.3 million people were estimated to require GBV services in 2023, a 51 percent increase from the previous year.¹⁸ In 2025 the UN Population Fund estimated that 2.7 million women and girls were at risk of GBV.¹⁹ Many legal frameworks to address GBV have stalled in parliament, reflecting conservative backlash, limited political will, and misrepresentation of their contents.²⁰

Despite these challenges, Somali women have played critical roles in building resilience and advocating for peace. National-level policy commitments include the 2018 National Gender Policy, the 2019 Women's Charter, and the 2023 NAP, though implementation has lagged.²¹ However, Somalia's 30 percent gender quota has remained aspirational rather than operational. Women's representation increased to approximately 24 percent in the 2016 electoral cycle, but this gain was not sustained. In the 2021–2022 elections, women's representation fell to around 20 percent, reflecting persistent structural barriers.²²

primarily pursued gender-responsive approaches through two of the four pillars of the WPS agenda: protection from gender-based harms and women's participation in decision-making, both within missions and in host states.²³ The UN Department of Peace Operations' (DPO) 2024 Gender-Responsive Peacekeeping Policy codifies gender integration across planning, operations, and evaluation.²⁴

The AU has also developed a growing body of policies and tools to implement normative

The body of policy and normative guidance has not automatically translated into practice at the mission level.

commitments on gender, including the AU Gender Policy (2009) and the Continental Results Framework on WPS (2018–2028).²⁵ Additionally, the AU Peace Support Operations Doctrine integrates gender perspectives into training modules and deployment criteria. However, a consolidated AU policy on gender-responsive peace support operations has not yet been developed and remains in draft form as of May 2026. The AU, therefore, lacks standardized WPS indicators, budgets, and incorporating gender into mandate

16 The UN Gender Inequality Index (GII) is a composite indicator developed by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) to measure gender-based disadvantage in a country. See: UNDP, "Gender Equality Index," available at <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/thematic-composite-indices/gender-inequality-index#/indicies/GII>.

17 UNICEF, "Female Genital Mutilation Data," available at <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/female-genital-mutilation/>; UNICEF, "Child Marriage Data," available at <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>.

18 UN Population Fund, "Overview of Gender-Based Violence Situation in Somalia," 2022.

19 UN Population Fund, "Somalia," available at <https://arabstates.unfpa.org/en/somalia?utm>.

20 Phoebe Donnelly and Mahathi Ayyagari, "Online Gender-Based Violence and a Path to Justice: Interview with Deqa Yasin," IPI Global Observatory, July 8, 2024.

21 Federal Government of Somalia, "Draft National Gender Policy," 2018; Somali Ministry of Women and Human Rights Developments, "Somali Women's Charter," 2019; Federal Government of Somalia, "The Somali Women's Charter and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda," 2023.

22 IPU Parline, "Somalia," available at <https://data.ipu.org/parliament/SO/SO-LC01/data-on-women/>.

23 While the WPS framework provides a comprehensive normative architecture across all four pillars, the prevention and relief and recovery pillars require long-term structural interventions, including addressing gender inequality, economic recovery, and social reconstruction, that are typically led by development and humanitarian actors rather than peace operations. As a result, prevention and relief and recovery have been less systematically operationalized within peace operations.

24 UN DPO, "Gender-Responsive United Nations Peacekeeping Operations Policy," 2024.

25 The Continental Results Framework standardizes forty-one indicators across participation, protection, prevention, and financing, addressing long-standing

implementation. This leads to significant variation in the implementation of WPS commitments across missions, troop-contributing countries, and sector leadership.

This body of policy and normative guidance has not automatically translated into practice at the mission level. Whether it does so depends on the mandates of individual missions and how they operationalize these mandates: what missions are instructed to do, who is tasked to act, and what is prioritized under pressure.²⁶ Gender-related commitments only shape mission behavior when they are embedded in the operational instruments through which missions allocate resources, structure patrols, assign responsibilities, and evaluate performance. These include core planning instruments like concepts of operations, operational plans, staffing tables, and budget frameworks as well as reports and training materials.²⁷ When gender provisions are not explicitly included in concrete mission frameworks, they tend to remain aspirational.²⁸

Mandates and Frameworks in UNMISS

In UNMISS's mandate, gender-related provisions have become increasingly specific and actionable over time, at least until a recent backlash against gender language in the Security Council threatened to reverse these gains. The initial mandate in Resolution 1996 (2011) referenced the importance of addressing sexual violence and human rights abuses impacting women and girls within UNMISS's civilian protection and rule-of-law duties.²⁹ These provisions were broadly framed, mainly within general human rights language rather than as concrete operational directives. Later

renewals incrementally strengthened the mission's commitment to gender-responsive peacekeeping, including Resolutions 2057 (2012) and 2109 (2013), which reiterated concerns about sexual and gender-based violence and called for stronger accountability for violations.³⁰

The outbreak of civil war in late 2013 marked a critical inflection point. Resolution 2155 (2014) prioritized the protection of civilians (POC), including protection from sexual and gender-based violence.³¹ As a result, gender-related issues were increasingly integrated into the mission's POC framework rather than treated as ancillary human rights concerns. This trend continued with Resolutions 2223 (2015) and 2241 (2015), which explicitly condemned rape and other sexual and gender-based violence and called for the ongoing deployment of women protection advisers and child protection advisers to improve monitoring, reporting, and responses to such crimes.³² These developments reflect the Security Council's shift from treating gender mainly as a broad normative issue to embedding it within the mission's protection architecture.

The impact of this mandate language on operational practice has been mixed. Resolution 2155 (2014) authorized the mission to use "all necessary means" to protect civilians under immediate threat. This shift allowed for the creation and expansion of UNMISS's POC sites, which at their height sheltered over 200,000 displaced people, mainly women and children. These sites prevented large-scale violence and provided physical safety from armed groups. Yet women and girls in the POC sites still faced gender-specific risks such as overcrowding, exploitation, and violence in or near the camps. In response, the

fragmentation in reporting on WPS. Others relevant policies include the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol), 2003; AU Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa, 2004; AU Gender Policy, 2009; AU Continental Results Framework for Monitoring and Reporting on the Implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Africa, 2018; AU Strategy for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment 2018–2028; and AU Policy on the Prevention and Response to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, 2017.

26 Laura Shepherd, *Gender, UN Peacekeeping and the Politics of Space* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

27 Operational guidance for peacekeeping military components similarly stresses that gender perspectives must be integrated into planning, deployment, and operational decision-making. See: UN DPO, "Implementing a Gender Perspective into the Military Component of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations Guidelines," March 2023.

28 Shepherd, *Gender, UN Peacekeeping and the Politics of Space*; Paul Kirby and Laura Shepherd, "The Futures Past of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda," *International Affairs* 92, no. 2 (2016).

29 UN Security Council Resolution 1996 (July 8, 2011), UN Doc. S/RES/1996.

30 UN Security Council Resolution 2057 (July 5, 2012), UN Doc. S/RES/2057; UN Security Council Resolution 2109 (July 11, 2013), UN Doc. S/RES/2109.

31 UN Security Council Resolution 2155 (May 27, 2014), UN Doc. S/RES/2155.

32 UN Security Council Resolution 2223 (May 28, 2015), UN Doc. S/RES/2223; UN Security Council Resolution 2241 (October 9, 2015), UN Doc. S/RES/2241.

mission changed its approach to patrolling and undertook specialized responses to conflict-related sexual violence.³³ This experience shows that POC mandates on their own do not guarantee safety or dignity for women and girls without sustained operational adjustments.

Later mandates continued to embed gender into mission protection structures. For example, successive mandates required the mission to deploy civilian gender advisers (2018), deploy uniformed gender advisers (2021), connect SGBV monitoring to operational planning (2018), formalize engagement with women's organizations in SGBV prevention and response (2019), appoint gender focal points across all mission components (2020), conduct proactive patrols in SGBV-prone areas (2020), actively intervene to protect against sexual violence (2023), and proactively counter violence against women in politics (2025). Similarly, provisions on participation have shifted from generic calls for women's involvement in peace processes to more specific provisions, including on the role of gender advisers in promoting women's participation (2024).

UNMISS has operationalized its protection-related gender mandates more readily than its participation-related ones.

Overall, UNMISS has operationalized its protection-related gender mandates more readily than its participation-related ones. Protection from conflict-related sexual violence and GBV align with familiar security practices such as early warning, patrols, and threat mitigation, making it easier to integrate into existing routines, even if implementation has often fallen short. Promoting women's participation, by contrast, requires reassigning planning and decision-making authority, diversifying consultation, and engaging with a broader range of stakeholders beyond political elites. In effect, it requires changing who is consulted, who has influence, and how authority is distributed,

areas where peacekeeping missions have more limited authority and leverage.

More recently, in 2025, language on WPS was a key point of contention among Security Council members. The United States, as penholder, circulated a draft without references to SGBV, "gender equality," "gender sensitive," and "gender considerations."³⁴ However, other council members pushed back, ultimately retaining most of the agreed language. Nonetheless, the episode underscores the fragility of normative advances on gender in the current political environment.

Mandates and Frameworks in AMISOM/ATMIS

The AU Peace and Security Council has also gradually incorporated gender into mandates for AMISOM and ATMIS. The council's early communiqués establishing and renewing AMISOM focused primarily on stabilization and support to Somali authorities, with only limited gender language beyond general references to protecting civilians and vulnerable populations.³⁵ As the mission expanded and civilian protection concerns grew, subsequent communiqués incorporated broader protection language and references to vulnerable groups, including women and children.³⁶

This evolution was further reflected in the 2023 AU Policy on the Protection of Civilians in African Union Peace Support Operations, which frames gender not only around protection but as a cross-cutting operational issue (including participation and inclusive decision making).³⁷ More recently, this trajectory culminated in the AU Peace Support Operation Department's work on drafting a Gender Mainstreaming Policy.³⁸

33 Phoebe Donnelly, Anna Naa Adochoo Mensah, and Olivia Parsons, "The Role of Military Gender Advisers in UN Peacekeeping Operations: Implications for Operational Effectiveness and The Future of Peacekeeping Operations," IPI, April 2026.

34 Security Council Report, "UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS): Vote on Mandate Renewal Resolution," May 8, 2025.

35 African Union Peace and Security Council (PSC), *Communiqué of the 163rd Meeting of the Peace and Security Council*, AU Doc. PSC/MIN/Comm.4(C LXIII), December 22, 2008.

36 While PSC Communiqué 279 (2011) begins emphasizing civilian protection, PSC Communiqué 594 (2016) contains clearer language on protection, women, children, humanitarian concerns, and civilian harm mitigation.

37 African Union, "African Union Policy on the Protection of Civilians in African Union Peace Support Operations," 2023.

38 United Nations Office to the African Union (UNOAU), "UNOAU Participates in AU Integrated Event on Gender Mainstreaming in Peace Support Operations," January 30, 2026.

Overall, AMISOM institutionalized gender responsiveness late and unevenly. AMISOM did not appoint its first gender adviser until 2012, at a time when the mission was facing repeated allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse.³⁹ The mission thus approached gender primarily through the lens of compliance and reputation management in response to SEA allegations. Over time, as its civilian component grew, AMISOM sought to invest more in softening its image and “winning hearts and minds,” creating more space for gender-responsive outreach. The mission developed a gender strategy, expanded its gender and protection structure, and encouraged troop-contributing countries to deploy women to roles that aligned with their skills and to integrate gender concerns into patrol planning and community engagement. The mission also integrated gender into its state-building agenda through support to the Somali government’s gender mechanisms. Nonetheless, commanders often confined women to rear or support roles rather than field positions or community-facing functions, resisted external scrutiny, and treated gender as secondary to force protection and kinetic objectives. Implementation ultimately depended on the commitment of individual leaders.

In both AMISOM and ATMIS, the practical application of gender provisions was shaped by the constraints of a counterinsurgency mission.

ATMIS inherited AMISOM’s structures and constraints, but its mandate included a more explicit formal commitment to gender responsiveness. During the transition from AMISOM to ATMIS, the PSC added more references to women’s participation, protection from SGBV, and gender considerations in peace support operations.⁴⁰ With the establishment of ATMIS, the PSC called for integrating gender considerations into mission tasks, supporting Somalia’s national frameworks on women’s participation and protection, and maintaining a zero-tolerance policy on sexual exploitation and abuse.⁴¹

As with UNMISS, however, the strengthening of

gender language did not automatically translate into operations, as many of these commitments were introduced after the mission’s force design and command structures had already been established. While ATMIS introduced more training on gender and gender focal points and encouraged women’s participation, this did not come with an overhaul in force posture, command culture, or deployment incentives. Effective implementation has depended on whether commanders, planners, and troop contributors internalize gender considerations rather than on the mandate itself.

In both AMISOM and ATMIS, the practical application of gender provisions was shaped by the constraints of a counterinsurgency mission. Force-protection priorities and heavily fortified bases limited ongoing engagement with local communities, especially women. This dominance of force-centric logic should not be understood as an operational inevitability in high-threat environments. It is a product of mandate design and political prioritization of stabilization over protection and engagement.

Taken together, the evolution of mandates across both missions demonstrates that gender responsiveness is most likely to shape mission practice when gender considerations are integrated early, translated into operations, and embedded in mission planning structures. When gender considerations are introduced late, framed around compliance or reputation management, or confined to managerial fixes, responsiveness will likely remain fragile and uneven. Mandates do not deliver gender responsiveness by default; they do so only when they enable missions to act differently. In both cases, gender frameworks consistently outpaced the political buy-in, force-generation incentives, and operational flexibility needed to realize them, producing normative advancement without commensurate change on the ground.

³⁹ Interview with former AU official, August 2025.

⁴⁰ AUPSC, *Communiqué of the 1068th Meeting of the Peace and Security Council on the Reconfiguration of the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM)*, AU Doc. PSC/PR/COMM.1068(2022) Rev.1, March 8, 2022.

⁴¹ AU Peace and Security Department, “African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) Transitions to African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS),” press release, April 1, 2022.

Institutional Design

While mandates define what missions are tasked with doing, missions' institutional design determines who can act on that authority, through which channels, and with what influence over operational decisions. Even when mandates authorize gender-responsive action, the location of gender advisers and focal points within mission hierarchies determines whether that analysis reaches planning, design, and strategies or is confined to training, reporting, and outreach. The critical factor is whether gender expertise is upstream in planning and command or downstream as an advisory or compliance function.

Positioning of Gender Expertise in UNMISS

In UNMISS, gender expertise has gradually become more incorporated into mission structures, in part in response to operational failures. Before the 2013 and 2016 crises, gendered protection risks were not consistently anticipated in mission planning. Commanders made ad hoc decisions to open the gates of UN bases to civilians fleeing violence without pre-established frameworks. This began to change with UNMISS's shift to a protection-centered mandate.

Currently, gender expertise in UNMISS is situated relatively close to mission leadership and operational planning. This reflects the UN's gender-responsive peacekeeping policy, which situates gender advisers within the offices of the SRSG, force commander, and police commissioner, with gender focal points in all sections.⁴² UNMISS's Gender Affairs Unit is headed by a senior gender adviser who reports directly to the SRSG and participates in senior decision-making forums. With approximately eighteen professional staff, the unit is positioned upstream where priorities are set

UNMISS's gender architecture combines centralized strategic advice on gender from the Gender Affairs Unit with the decentralized reach of gender focal points.

and revised rather than consulted after plans have been finalized.⁴³ This positioning allows gender analysis to feed into early-warning systems, patrol planning, programming, and protection measures such as the establishment of safe corridors and gender-sensitive patrol routes.⁴⁴

In addition to the Gender Affairs Unit, a decentralized network of gender focal points is distributed across the mission's military, police, and civilian components. These focal points work alongside women protection advisers (WPAs), who focus specifically on preventing and responding to conflict-related sexual violence under the mission's protection mandate. Community-level information also enters the mission through community liaison assistants (CLAs), who maintain regular contact with local communities and help identify emerging protection risks. The value of CLAs lies not simply in reporting incidents but in surfacing

qualitative information about mobility, exposure, and local insecurity that may not appear in formal reporting channels.⁴⁵ Whether this information influences planning and tasking processes depends on

whether missions have institutional mechanisms to move it upward.

Overall, UNMISS's gender architecture combines centralized strategic advice on gender from the Gender Affairs Unit with the decentralized reach of gender focal points. The Gender Affairs Unit provides strategic access to leadership, while the decentralized network allows gender-relevant information to circulate across operational branches and feeds field-level information up to leadership. This structure facilitates the translation of gender commitments into operational practice. Centralized gender units alone may generate visibility but lack operational reach, while decentralized focal points without strategic authority risk fragmentation.

For example, a former police gender adviser described how gender advisers embedded within

42 DPO, "Gender-Responsive United Nations Peacekeeping Operations Policy," 2024.

43 Interview with former UN official, October 2024.

44 Ibid. Donnelly, Mensah, and Parsons, "The Role of Military Gender Advisers in UN Peacekeeping Operations."

45 Adam Day and Elisa de Brún, "The Role of Community Liaison Assistants in UN Peacekeeping," United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, 2020.

the office of the police commissioner regularly briefed the commissioner and command staff on the recruitment and deployment of female officers, community policing priorities, and engagement with women's organisations. Female officers had initially been excluded from certain duties, including night patrols, due to security concerns and cultural resistance, but this sustained engagement led to the gradual incorporation of women into mixed patrol teams and outreach activities. This improved the mission's situational awareness and protection planning, as women in communities were more willing to share information on local tensions, early-warning indicators, and sexual violence with female officers.⁴⁶

Positioning of Gender Expertise in AMISOM

In AMISOM, the mission's gender responsiveness was constrained by the institutional placement of gender expertise within the mission structure. A small gender office was established in 2012 within the civilian component, initially with only two staff and positioned downstream of operational decision-making.⁴⁷ Resolution 2093 also called on AMISOM to deploy a women's protection adviser in 2013.⁴⁸ Gender focal points were eventually introduced in military and police components to support gender mainstreaming at the sector level, with one focal point per sector for the military and two per sector for the police.

Gender advisers were largely excluded from operational decision-making and planning and were typically consulted only after operational plans had already been drafted. Their role was largely limited to advising, coordination, reporting, and training.⁴⁹ They often struggled to obtain information from commanders or ensure that misconduct allegations were channelled through mission-wide accountability systems. The gender

focal points lacked capacity and held authority largely informally, with little leverage within military command structures.⁵⁰

The transition from AMISOM to ATMIS in 2022 introduced incremental improvements without fundamentally repositioning gender expertise within the mission's command architecture. It thus improved the visibility of gender experts but not their authority. The gender office was modestly expanded, with staff posted at the headquarters and sector levels. But gender officers remained thinly distributed, often serving in dual roles and without consistent access to operational planning meetings. ATMIS lacked a dedicated senior gender adviser at the leadership level. The workload of gender officers was described as too heavy for the available personnel, and effective implementation of gender-related commitments depended on dedicated individuals rather than institutionalized systems.⁵¹

Despite these shortcomings, ATMIS made some incremental progress in incorporating gender considerations into its work. Gender was integrated into patrol planning in some sectors, female personnel participated in short- and long-range patrols, female engagement teams were able to reach women and girls in culturally conservative settings, and the mission provided training-of-trainers to build the capacity of gender desks and gender units within Somali ministries and security institutions. Female ATMIS peacekeepers were praised for improving engagement with Somali women and youth and for serving as role models.⁵² ATMIS also engaged local women's groups through civil affairs and civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) teams.⁵³ The AU retained gender as a priority even under financial pressure, signaling institutional commitment. Overall, however, these examples of gender-responsive action remained ad hoc.

46 Interview with UN official, October 2024.

47 AMISOM developed institutions related to gender much later than UNMISS. For the first five years, no dedicated gender structure existed, and gender issues were largely absent from the mandate and from mission planning.

48 UN Security Council Resolution 2093 (March 6, 2013), UN Doc. S/RES/2093.

49 Interview with ATMIS official, June 2025; Interviews with former AMISOM civilian staff, 2023–2024.

50 Interviews with ATMIS official, February 2026.

51 Interview with AU official, June 2025.

52 ISS, "Gender Parity Is Paramount in Peace Support Operations," August 8, 2023.

53 ATMIS, "ATMIS Mentorship Program Empowers Somali Girls," December 31, 2024; ATMIS, "Newly Deployed ATMIS Officers Undergo Training in Civil-Military Relations," September 7, 2024.

Composition and Deployment

The WPS agenda treats women’s participation in peacekeeping as both a normative goal and key to a mission’s effectiveness. A mission’s operational effectiveness depends on who is deployed and their roles and authority. These factors shape a mission’s gender responsiveness, early-warning capacity, and local legitimacy. Force composition can determine whether gender-related policy translates into practice or stalls at the level of rhetoric.

Evidence from both UNMISS and AMISOM/ATMIS indicates that female peacekeepers can enhance local trust, information collection, and incident reporting when missions deliberately create conditions for their meaningful participation. Force composition shapes what missions can see and understand about the conflict environment. Early warning, peacekeeping-intelligence, and community engagement all depend on who peacekeepers can reach and who is willing to speak to them. In environments where gender norms restrict interactions between men and women, an overwhelmingly male force is structurally limited, regardless of its other capabilities. The 2015 High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) observed that female personnel often play a critical role in engaging with women and girls, understanding their protection needs, and tailoring responses accordingly.⁵⁴

In environments where gender norms restrict interactions between men and women, an overwhelmingly male force is structurally limited.

Women Peacekeepers in UNMISS

In military contingents, overall, women remain severely underrepresented, with only marginal differences between them. In UNMISS, women constitute roughly 10 percent of uniformed personnel across military, police, and observer

roles, short of the target of 15 percent by 2028.⁵⁵

However, representation alone does not guarantee gender responsiveness. Whether women’s presence influences a mission’s behavior depends on how female personnel are tasked, ranked, and integrated into operational systems such as patrol planning, intelligence loops, and command structures. For example, a former police gender adviser in UNMISS explained that the mission only became gender-responsive in practice when female officers were integrated into mixed patrols and community policing initiatives rather than confined to administrative roles.⁵⁶

Such mixed patrol teams and female police officers have enabled the mission to engage with women who would otherwise avoid contact with male peacekeepers. Interviewees reported that women in communities were often more willing to report sexual violence or early-warning indicators to female officers, seeing them as “one of their own,” which improved protection planning and patrol design. UNMISS patrols involving female officers were also credited with strengthening relationships with displaced women in POC sites and surrounding communities.⁵⁷

Women Peacekeepers in AMISOM/ATMIS

In AMISOM/ATMIS, by contrast, the mission’s emphasis on degrading al-Shabaab and controlling territory rather than community engagement and the protection of civilians limited opportunities for women to deploy. Such heavily militarized environments tend to sustain male-dominated force structures, as troop contributors rely on infantry units where women are the most underrepresented. This is demonstrated by women’s low representation among uniformed personnel at just 5 percent.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, *Report of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting Our Strengths for Peace: Politics, Partnership and People*, UN Doc. A/70/95-S/2015/446, June 17, 2015.

⁵⁵ UN women: Gender equality in peacekeeping: Why it matters for global security. 9 May 2025. <https://knowledge.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/gender-equality-in-peacekeeping-why-it-matters-for-global-security?utm>.

⁵⁶ Interview with former UN police official, October 2024.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Unlike the UN, the AU does not systematically publish gender-disaggregated force data by component, rank, or unit. Available figures rely on mission statements rather than consolidated reporting. In March 2023, ATMIS leadership reported 923 female military personnel within the mission, with representation concentrated in junior ranks and support roles.

This had consequences. Somali civil-military partners pointed out that AMISOM's advice on women's participation rang hollow given the mission's own low number of female peacekeepers. Female personnel are also valuable for engaging Somali women due to cultural norms restricting interactions between unrelated men and women.⁵⁹ For example, female officers at checkpoints in Mogadishu could search women and collect information about household insecurity, displacement, and protection risks. Outreach by CIMIC and civil affairs teams also often depended on female personnel to connect with women's groups and internally displaced women near Mogadishu and Baidoa.⁶⁰ As one interviewee explained, "When you have male peacekeepers, they basically have to attend to male Somali beneficiaries.... When we have female peacekeepers, [they attend] to female Somali populations." But while mission leaders urged troop contributors to deploy women to checkpoints, community engagement, and support roles, some contingents hesitated, and this type of engagement was not systematic.⁶¹

In both missions, the continued underrepresentation of women in peace operations reflects structural constraints with force generation. Because missions depend on forces provided by member states, the gender makeup of peace operations largely mirrors the recruitment practices, career paths, and gender norms of contributing countries. When women are underrepresented in national military and police forces, missions inherit those deficits. Across many contributing countries, women's participation in military and police institutions remains limited by recruitment practices, career progression rules, and combat eligibility restriction.⁶²

The limited pool of uniformed women peacekeepers is particularly challenging in AMISOM/ATMIS, which were heavily reliant on troops from a small number of countries in the region with low numbers of women in their

national forces. UNMISS, by contrast, draws from a more diverse pool of contributors, some of which have made greater progress integrating women into deployable military and police units. AMISOM/ATMIS also lacked an overarching strategy comparable to the UN's Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy.

Moreover, treating female peacekeepers primarily as tools for increasing a mission's operational effectiveness or gender responsiveness can have adverse effects, including by increasing pressure on them to conform to gender stereotypes. By contrast, framing women's participation as a goal in itself, supported by training and cultural change, can encourage meaningful participation rather than tokenism. It can also avoid placing the sole responsibility for activities like engaging local communities or preventing misconduct on women's shoulders.⁶³

Leadership and Command Climate

While mandates, institutional design, and force composition enable gender responsiveness, it is leadership that puts it into practice. Mission leaders decide whether gender analysis influences patrol design, women are assigned to operational roles, and engagement with women's organizations becomes a routine part of mission activities. Without leadership backing, gender considerations are readily displaced by other operational pressures. Genuine institutional change requires leaders who actively address structural barriers, discriminatory practices, and gendered assumptions within mission structures.⁶⁴

Committed leaders can convert mandate language into practice.⁶⁵ As one official observed, without top-level advocacy, WPS commitments "risk remaining rhetorical, they exist on paper but don't translate into practice." Gender equality initiatives

59 Ingvild Magnæs Gjelsvik, "Women, Peace and Security in Somalia: A Study of AMISOM," Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), 2013.

60 Interview with AU official, August, 2025.

61 Interview with former AMISOM/ATMIS protection officer, June 2025.

62 Interview with the AU compliance office, January 2026.

63 Nina Wilén, "Female Peacekeepers' Added Burden," *International Affairs* 96, no. 6 (2020); Christoph Zürcher, "Adding Women May Not Help Keep the Peace," Center for International Policy Studies, November 2021.

64 Sarah Smith, "Gender-Responsive Leadership in UN Peace Operations: The Path to a Transformative Approach?" International Peace Institute, February 2022.

65 Sabrina Karim and Kyle Beardsley, *Equal Opportunity Peacekeeping: Women, Peace, and Security in Post-conflict States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

“routinely fail when they lack support from leadership,” and leaders may inadvertently perpetuate institutional biases that sideline gender issues.⁶⁶ This leadership role is codified in the UN Gender-Responsive Peacekeeping Policy, which requires mission leaders, among other things, to set priorities and targets based on gender data and analysis, include gender equality objectives in work plans, allocate resources to gender expertise, and ensure zero tolerance for discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexism.⁶⁷

Without top-level advocacy, WPS commitments “risk remaining rhetorical, they exist on paper but don’t translate into practice.”

The experience of AMISOM/ATMIS in Somalia illustrates what happens when leadership commitment to gender is inconsistent. There was no requirement in AMISOM/ATMIS for operational plans to include gender analysis. Progress on gender inclusion depended on the goodwill of individual contingent commanders, who were frequently preoccupied with combat operations against al-Shabaab. Without high-level backing, gender advisers and focal points had little leverage in the mission’s chain of command, and their initiatives were readily sidelined by competing priorities.⁶⁸

UNMISS leaders have regularly regarded protection, inclusion, and community engagement as core mandates. While the mission had two female SRSGs in its early years, Hilde F. Johnson and Ellen Margrethe Løj, male leaders in the mission have also exhibited gender-responsive leadership. Former UNMISS Force Commander Lieutenant General Mohan Subramanian showed that male commanders who prioritize WPS can normalize gender as an operational priority rather than a “women’s issue.” He stated that “gender-responsive leadership is the only kind of leadership that is acceptable and effective” and operationalized this commitment in practice. Under his leadership,

UNMISS got its first female contingent commander, and several women were placed in leadership roles in the field.⁶⁹

Mission leaders in UNMISS have also engaged regularly with the Gender Affairs Unit, seeking its advice on both internal parity issues and external programming with South Sudanese partners.⁷⁰ The unit has been integrated into both the political and protection pillars of the mission, indicating that gender input informs the overall mission strategy and is not limited to specific issues.⁷¹ While this is not indicative of uniform implementation of gender responsiveness across the mission, it does show that leadership created channels for gender expertise to inform mission decision-making.

Community Engagement

Gender-responsive community engagement is essential to the effectiveness of peace operations. For example, engaging with local women can help inform missions’ decisions to adjust patrol routes, increase security in high-risk areas, or respond to threats. This can create a feedback loop that both improves protection planning and enhances a mission’s legitimacy.

UNMISS has developed several mechanisms to operationalize this feedback loop. For example, through community engagement with local women, the mission identified specific locations and times where women faced attacks while collecting water or firewood; the mission then organized “twilight patrols” at those locations and times. This reportedly reduced the number of abductions and assaults.⁷² The mission also hosts “Open Days on Women, Peace and Security” where women from across South Sudan share their security concerns and priorities. These discussions

⁶⁶ Interview with UN official, October 2024.

⁶⁷ UN DPO, “Gender Responsive United Nations Peacekeeping Operations Policy,” 2024.

⁶⁸ Interview with ATMIS official, October 2024.

⁶⁹ UN, “Women Peacekeepers Push for Stronger Participation in Leadership and Decision-Making Processes during Online Conversation with UNMISS Force Commander,” September 11, 2024.

⁷⁰ Interview with former UNMISS official, July 2025.

⁷¹ Interview with representatives of UNMISS Gender Affairs Unit, June 2025.

⁷² UN, “Women Peacekeepers Push for Stronger Participation in Leadership and Decision-Making Processes during Online Conversation with UNMISS Force Commander,” September 11, 2024.

have led to operational changes. In addition, women's protection teams in POC and internally displaced person sites conduct regular focus groups to identify emerging threats and feed early-warning information into mission planning.⁷³

Evidence from Somalia demonstrates that gender-responsive community engagement can provide operational advantages, but those advantages depend on security conditions. Women-led outreach initiatives and partnerships with local women's groups have created channels for women to report security concerns and humanitarian needs. For example, female peacekeepers have organized community forums for women. Local leaders reported that such engagement generated goodwill and cooperation and, in some cases, encouraged residents to alert peacekeepers to potential security threats.⁷⁴

Engaging with local women can help inform missions' decisions to adjust patrol routes, increase security in high-risk areas, or respond to threats.

Yet without sustained and regular interaction between peacekeepers and communities, the trust and intelligence generated through engagement quickly erode.⁷⁵ ATMIS's community engagement was constrained by insecurity, force protection imperatives, and a mission posture centered on fortified bases rather than a population-centric presence.⁷⁶ For instance, insecurity in parts of Mogadishu limited outreach efforts, and in many frontline areas peacekeepers found it impossible to engage communities informally. Patrols operated mainly as armed escorts rather than mechanisms for community engagement, particularly with women, who faced additional barriers to approaching heavily armed, predominantly male forces.⁷⁷ As such, the mission experienced the ambiguities and tensions characteristic of counterinsurgency-oriented peace operations that

prioritize territorial stabilization over protection.⁷⁸

Incidents of civilian harm resulting from ATMIS peacekeepers, including sexual exploitation and abuse, further eroded trust.⁷⁹ While ATMIS's small number of female officers often led reconciliation efforts, engaging women's groups to listen and offer assurances of better protection, these initiatives remained weakly institutionalized.⁸⁰ Without high-level backing, these efforts were fragile and reversible.

Nonetheless, in relatively safer areas like Baidoa and Kismayo, some units deployed female outreach teams. For example, female Kenyan soldiers in

AMISOM donated food and medical supplies to Somali women and children in camps through the "Women Empowering Women" initiative. ATMIS also supported Somali radio programs on

women's rights and collaborated with local NGOs to promote women's leadership and Somalia's 30 percent quota for women's representation in parliament.⁸¹ These efforts yielded results: a Somali elder reported that community projects, including women-led programs, led local informants to alert troops about an impending attack. Even limited gender-responsive engagement can enhance community cooperation when security conditions allow.⁸²

Conclusion and Recommendations

Evidence from UNMISS and AMISOM/ATMIS shows that gender responsiveness in peace operations depends more on the systems that guide

73 Interview with Somali civil society representative, July 2025.

74 ATMIS, "ATMIS Mentorship Program Empowers Somali Girls," December 31, 2024; African Union, "Women Are Sustaining Momentum on Peace and Security in Somalia, Says AU-UN Leaders," November 1, 2019.

75 Josh Jorgensen, "Strengthening Protection of Civilians by AU Peace Support Operations for a New Era of Missions," Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), November 2024.

76 Walter Lotze and Yvonne Kasumba, "AMISOM and the Protection of Civilians in Somalia," *Conflict Trends* 2 (2012).

77 Interview with Somali civil society representative, July 2025.

78 Paul D. Williams, "The African Union Mission in Somalia and Civilian Protection Challenges," *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 2, no. 2 (2013).

79 Human Rights Watch, "The Power These Men Have Over Us: Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by African Union Forces in Somalia," 2014.

80 Gjelsvik, "Women, Peace and Security in Somalia."

81 AMISOM, "AMISOM Kenyan Contingent Supports Women Groups in Dhobley," October 11, 2019.

82 Interview with Somali civil society representative, July 2025.

mission operations than on normative commitments. Although both missions' mandates increasingly included gender provisions, the extent to which these provisions were implemented varied significantly.

In UNMISS, gender expertise was gradually embedded within mission leadership and integrated into protection planning. This enabled gender analysis to shape patrol routes, community engagement efforts, and protection responses. While the broader political and security environment constrained the impact of these efforts, this gender-responsive approach improved the mission's situational awareness and allowed it to develop targeted protection measures.

In Somalia, AMISOM was relatively late in committing to gender responsiveness. Civilian gender units had limited influence on military operations, and the mission prioritized counter-insurgency and force protection over sustained community engagement. Gender-related efforts mainly took the form of training, outreach, and specialized teams without being systematically integrated into core operational planning. The shift from ATMIS to the African Union Support and Stabilisation Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) offers a chance to address some of these structural challenges.

Overall, both missions demonstrate several conditions needed to enable gender responsiveness in practice.

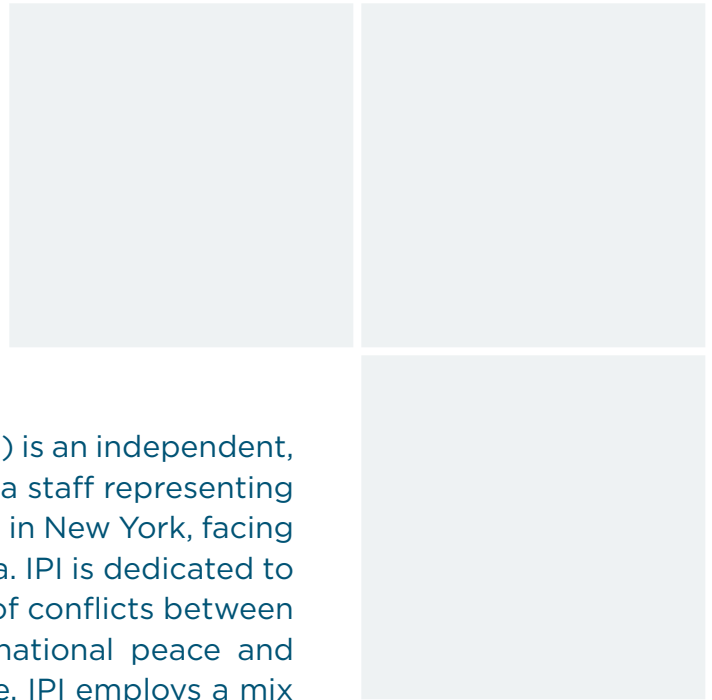
- **Mandates need to include provisions to operationalize gender-related commitments:** The UN Security Council and AU Peace and Security Council should resist the trend toward reducing gender language in mandates. In particular, they should preserve and, where possible, add language that goes beyond reiterating norms to operationalize gender-related commitments, such as provisions mandating the deployment of gender advisers or patrols in areas with a high risk of SGBV. The councils and missions should also focus on the implementation of existing mandates. Toward this end, missions should not simply report on numerical participation targets or training activities; they should also report on how gender analysis informs protection planning, patrol design, and community engagement.
- **Gender expertise needs to be included upstream of decision-making:** The placement of gender expertise within a mission's hierarchy determines how much this expertise influences operations. Where gender advisers sit below the planning and coordination functions that shape mission behavior, their influence is limited, regardless of what the mandate requires. Gender expertise should be integrated into planning cells, force generation processes, and senior leadership structures rather than in standalone units that are consulted after operational decisions have been taken.
- **Women peacekeepers need to be deployed to roles and ranks where they can make a difference:** The case for deploying more women peacekeepers is operational as well as normative: female military and police personnel expand missions' reach into communities that would otherwise be inaccessible, improving the information missions receive and enhancing trust with local communities. However, focusing on the total number of women deployed can obscure whether women are present at the level of seniority or in the roles where their deployment matters most. Troop- and police-contributing countries should deploy women not only in junior-level or support functions but also in frontline and command roles where they can interact with local communities and influence decision-making.
- **Leadership needs to prioritize gender and incorporate gender analysis into planning:** Effective implementation of gender-related mandates depends on the commitment of individual leaders. Senior mission leaders, including SRSGs, force commanders, and police commissioners, should therefore be evaluated against the extent to which they operationalize gender-related commitments. While senior leaders' compacts with the secretary-general already include a section on gender equality and WPS, this section is often formulaic.⁸³ Performance compacts should focus less on outputs and more on processes, such as whether gender advisers participated in

⁸³ Smith, "Gender-Responsive Leadership in UN Peace Operations."

planning cycles and whether community feedback informed threat assessments. Leadership evaluations could also include more structured mechanisms for feedback from local populations, including women's organizations.

- **Missions need to prioritize gender-responsive analysis and approaches from the outset:** Missions are more likely to be gender-responsive when this is built into mission planning from the start rather than retrofitted later on. This requires gender analysis to inform protection planning, patrol design, and community engagement from the earliest stages of mission design. Missions should particularly plan for

gender-responsive community engagement with local populations, including women and girls. This could include patrols by gender-balanced engagement teams, regular dialogue with women's organizations, and the deployment of community liaison assistants. In high-threat environments, missions should also reconsider force postures that preclude community engagement by keeping peacekeepers in heavily fortified bases. This could entail innovative approaches such as the creation of protected spaces or community centers where peacekeepers, including female personnel, can interact safely with local populations.



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