

Issues with women in policing on peacekeeping missions

[A. Leanne Giraud]

“Peacemaking and peacekeeping operations, to be truly successful, must come to include comprehensive efforts to identify and support structures which will tend to consolidate peace and advance a sense of confidence and well-being among people...”

Democracy within nations requires respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms... it requires as well a deeper understanding and respect for the rights of minorities and respect for the need of the more vulnerable groups of society, especially women and children.”¹

The Concept of Peace and Policing

The concept of peace is a simple one, however, the way in which it is achieved is often far more complex, and can at times appear contradictory in nature. With renewed fears and insecurities facing the modern world, with the threat of nuclear arms, increasing terrorist attacks and global hostilities, the peace process often appears as though it requires more violence and acts of retaliation rather than goodwill and understanding.

Despite this, the United Nations and the many thousands of individuals that make up this huge organisation still strive in the hope that one day international peace may be achieved by more passive and diplomatic means.

It is a recognised fact that part of the process in any peacekeeping operation is to establish and maintain a stable law-enforcement environment. To do this, the UN draws upon the resources of the various different nations to make up the ranks of UN police who can be assimilated successfully into mission life, and re-establish law and order in an otherwise conflict-torn country. Of course, these police ranks are made up of both men and women.

While men have generally made up the majority of numbers within UN missions, it is clear the UN has every intention of giving women a far greater role in policing on peacekeeping missions. Certainly, this can be seen in such documents as Resolution 1325, adopted by the UN Security Council at a meeting on 31 October 2000. The UN has not only formally recognised the importance of women in the maintenance of international peace and security but has stressed “...The importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and

promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution...”²

The Commission on the Status of Women (1995) clearly articulates the recognised benefits of having more women in law-enforcement and decision-making roles on peacekeeping operations. Of particular note are the listed benefits of having women in such roles, because of their ability to de-escalate tensions with greater effect, to gain the trust and confidence of local people, to use otherwise unorthodox yet highly successful methods in negotiation and to remain more focused on human rights issues.³

In general, the UN has recognised that women perceive the peace process differently to men, and this can be of great advantage to peacekeeping operations.

So, the question remains, why are female police officers still finding the prospect of peacekeeping operations inaccessible?

At present, there are law enforcement officers from more than 24 different countries currently serving as UN Police within the United Nations Mission in Support of East Timor (UNMISSET). Since 1999, the UN has worked extensively in East Timor, helping to re-establish the country's independence and stabilise the civil unrest since the independence vote.

In May 2002, East Timor became the world's newest nation, and UNMISET was set up by Resolution 1410(2000) to provide assistance to core administrative structures critical to the viability and political stability of East Timor, to provide interim law enforcement and public security, to assist in the development of a national police service, and contribute to the maintenance of the country's external and internal security.⁴

With a major focus on the need for stability, democracy, justice and public security, it is evident UNMISET has a strong law enforcement focus. As such, UN police play an invaluable and integral part in the success of this mission.

In October 2003, there were a total of 496 UN Police serving with UNMISET. The total of female police officers in East Timor at this time was 37. In speaking with many of these women, it appears there are still generally perceived barriers to allowing female officers to participate on peacekeeping missions. While there may be specific barriers within individual missions, it is interesting to note that the majority of females felt the main obstacles fell into two main categories;

- the lack of women in policing within their home countries; and
- the perception that female police officers may not possess all the necessary physical or psychological skills to contribute effectively to a mission.

Clearly, the largest obstacle to boosting numbers of female police officers in peacekeeping operations would seem to be the fact that the number of females in law enforcement around the world is still surprisingly low. Studies have continued to show that one of the greatest barriers to increasing the numbers of women in policing is the behaviour and attitude of their male counterparts.⁵

Certainly, as recently as the early 1970s within Australia, women police officers were treated in a completely different manner to male officers. Female officers were not allowed to carry firearms, were generally restricted to office or non-operational duties and even drove different vehicles. Furthermore, if a female officer married and wished to start a family, this certainly meant the end of any career in law enforcement.

While it is accepted that such hostile environments and systemic discrimination is declining, remnants and memories of such treatment still exists, which makes it difficult for women to truly progress and be fully accepted in the same way as their male counterparts.

Essentially, until the numbers of women can be boosted internationally within law enforcement bodies, numbers on peacekeeping missions will not increase significantly.

The second discussed barrier for female officers in peacekeeping operations would appear to be perceptions that begin at home. Many female officers within UNMISET commented that because of their previous home duties (mother, carer, home-maker and so on) they feel they are viewed as not possessing the required skills



and strength necessary to work effectively on a mission. In other words, they are not resilient enough to fulfil the role, and should stay home where they are better suited.

This mindset can be compounded by family, friends and peers who may perceive peacekeeping operations as brutal, harsh and unforgiving environments. Certainly, this perception is not completely unjustified.

Recent media interest in UN operations such as in Iraq, with the bombing of the UN Headquarters in Baghdad, have also heightened this sense of danger.

In reality, such environments are exactly where the female police officer is often needed.

As stated before, the UN has already recognised the benefits of having women on peacekeeping missions, especially for their ability to perceive the peace process differently and to draw upon a different set of skills, knowledge and abilities.

As mentioned earlier, the idea of peace is simple, yet the way in which it is achieved can often be contradictory. The perception is that peacekeeping has been for many years a military consideration and women's involvement in the military has been, to say the least, limited.

Considering that since the establishment of the UN, nearly all early peacekeeping operations were exclusively military, it is not surprising this concept of peace missions being war zones is still perpetuated and with the lack of women in the military, it is easy to see why the

perception about women's involvement in military operations is a limited one.

It is this militaristic view that such operations still require physical strength and a ruthless psychology rather than a humanistic approach that continues to perpetuate the idea that missions are not really a place for women, other than to provide humanitarian care.

In truth, there is not a great need for physical strength and a ruthless psychology in the modern peacekeeping operation. Rather, the more subtle skills of tactful negotiation, diplomacy, excellent communication, an innate ability to deal with people at all levels and building community trust are far more necessary and essential to the role of rebuilding a nation.

Years of study have proven that women in policing perform better than their male counterparts at defusing potentially dangerous and violent situations. They become involved in excessive use of force incidents less often, and build better community relations. Women police officers also respond and resolve far more effectively to incidents of violence against women and children.⁶

Furthermore, studies have shown that corruption levels have decreased considerably with the increase of women in law enforcement. This generally is due to the fact that women tend to view policing as a community service where as men see it as involving control through authority.⁷

The greatest cost of civil war is often human rights, with the women and children being the most affected. Surely then, such skills possessed by female police officers are exactly what the UN is seeking in peacekeeping operations.

In October 2003, a study was conducted in relation to the status of women working within UNMISSET. At this time, the total number of peacekeepers (PKF and UN Police) was 3986, with the total number of women being only 150, or approximately 3.8 per cent.



Photo by Brian Hartigan

The question was raised then as to performance issues within UNMISSET in relation to women in policing. Were female officers not performing adequately, and why not? The answer to this question was;

“There is no problem with performance. It is a question of selection. Members should continue to be selected on a merit basis. Perhaps a way to increase the participation of women in any UN mission is to encourage women applicants from contributing nations where, apart from having normal policing skills, those women have specialised skills in management, investigation of domestic or sexual assault cases and resolution skills for family issues. Increase for instance the female police staffing for the Vulnerable Persons Unit in their centres of Operations”.⁸

The UN, as discussed previously, has recognised this fact, and has begun taking proactive steps towards targeting these specific skills. An excellent example of this is the employment of the UN Police Commissioner to Timor Leste, Ms Sandi Peisley. Having been a police officer since May 1974, with years of invaluable policing and management experience, and having served in a previous UN mission in Cyprus where she was a superintendent, Commissioner Peisley is a powerful example of how women in policing bring to a mission an entirely different set of skills and life experiences, making them an invaluable asset to any peacekeeping operation.

Skills targeting needs to go further though, with proactive marketing of the recognition and need for women not just for their policing abilities or other generic management or investigative skills, but rather those skills as listed within the UN Commission on the Status of Women; the ability to mobilise women within host countries, possessing highly successful negotiation techniques, being better community builders in gaining local trust and confidence, a greater humanitarian focus on the issues with women and children within host countries, and their ability to be more culturally sensitive.

And, instead of simply ‘marketing’ the recognition and requirement of these skills, workshops and seminars designed to

improve these abilities could also be conducted, both within the contributing countries and within the mission. The promotion of development sessions focusing on such training as negotiation and conflict resolution, community building and cross-cultural awareness could go a long way to drawing more female officers into the UN as peacekeepers. Furthermore, the UN could easily 'sell' the benefits of contributing countries conducting more of these types of training sessions as it will enhance the skills and abilities of all officers regardless of whether they attend peace operations or not.

“Essentially, until the numbers of women can be boosted internationally within law enforcement bodies, numbers on peacekeeping missions will not increase significantly.”

It is important to understand that this is not to suggest that women in policing should be placed in 'softer' areas of missions, dealing with purely humanitarian needs and welfare issues. What this means, is that those other skills and abilities enhance their policing function on mission and assist them to be more effective in the field. It means they can draw upon more unconventional techniques, perhaps ones that their male counterparts may not consider in the same situation.

The issue of the low numbers of women in policing globally is not something the UN can impact greatly at this point in time. The UN can, however, have a greater impact on attracting more women to peacekeeping missions by proactively marketing the need not just for women with policing skills, or management skills or sex-crimes investigation experience and so on, but rather, target the international perceptions that while peace operations can be harsh, unforgiving environments, women can not only handle such environments just as well as their male counterparts but at the same time can positively contribute so much more to the peace-process by complimenting their existing policing skills with these other abilities.

Once the perception shifts that women are needed for a totally different set of skills and abilities, then we may see more women desirous of attending missions as they feel they will be able to contribute so much more, without trying to match-up to their male counterparts. Rather, they can embrace their own differences and use them wisely in the effort to strive for peace.

“Just because you work alongside men, don't try to think like a man, act like a man or conquer like a man. You may have shared

the same training, read the same manuals and been taught the same lessons. But you are undeniably different in the way in which you perceive the world. Embrace those differences, and use them wisely in your best efforts as a police officer to achieve harmony.”⁹

Federal Agent (Ashley) Leanne Giraud has been a member of the Australian Federal Police since February 1988, and has worked in a variety of areas in law enforcement including General Duties, Surveillance, Fraud and General Crime, Intelligence and Drug Operations, Internal Investigations and Learning and Development. She is a qualified Workplace Trainer and Assessor, and is completing a Graduate Diploma in Professional Development Education.

She has just completed a six-month tour in Timor Leste, as a station sergeant with the 11th Australian Police Contingent deployed to UNMISSET, departing mission in November 2003.

¹ An Agenda for Peace, Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peacekeeping—Report of the Secretary-General pursuant to the statement adopted by the Summit Meeting of the Security Council on 31 January 1992

² UN Security Council Resolution 1325(2000)

³ UN Commission on the Status of Women: Thirty-ninth session, New York, 15 March–4 April 1995

⁴ United Nations Mission in Support of East Timor website

⁵ Equality Denied: The Status of Women in Policing, 1997 (Revised 1998—National Centre for Women & Policing, a division of the Feminist Majority Foundation.

⁶ Changing the Face of Policing: The National Centre for Women & Policing—Feminist Majority Foundation

⁷ This Is What You Get When Men Rule The Roost by Katherine Spiller & Penny Harrington: National Centre for Women in Policing—Los Angeles Times 18 February 2000

⁸ Status of Women in UNMISSET (October 2002 to October 2003)—Deputy Commissioner Operations UNMISSET: DC(0)456

⁹ Federal Agent A. Leanne Giraud—Coaching Women in Policing Workshop (Melbourne, Australia 1998)