Beyond the Battlefield

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Men fight as soldiers on the front lines, while women are the victims of violence. This highly gendered perception of wars and conflicts remains to this day, and stereotypes persist. It was only 25 years ago that the modern international community officially recognized that these images do not correspond to reality and never have (NATO, 2024).

On the 31st of October 2000, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) released Resolution 1325 on "Women and peace and security", as the inaugural international resolution recognizing the impact of armed conflict on women, and advocating for increased female participation, protection, and integration during every part of conflicts. Furthermore, it urged gender perspective incorporation in peace operations (POs) and un-

derscored the importance of specialized training for addressing the unique needs of women and children in conflict situations. Most important, Res 1325 redefined the perspective on women, from being sorely perceived as victims to be recognized as actors (UNSC, 2000).

In response to the call for the international community to incorporate these perspectives into work, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), communicated the long-term goal to integrate Res 1325 both internally as an institution and externally within its missions (NATO, 2011). It seems like an ambitious task for a multinational security institution, as coherent gender mainstreaming goes hand in hand with a requirement for institutional change an adaptation of this change in every aspect of is peacekeeping, stabilization, and military missions.

In this article, we seek to trace not only the recent history of gender perspectives in the military but also follow the operational evidence and shed light on successes, deformations and trends of mentioned Women, Peace and Security Agenda (WPS) implementation especially into NATO's peacekeeping missions.

Irrespective of the challenges associated primarily with the military implementation of the WPS agenda, the positive impact on the effectiveness of NATO's POs is evident. Nonetheless to this day, some seem to think that "gender wokeness" is more a well-intentioned add-on than an actual benefit for societies, organizations, and, above all, people. For the military world especially, so-called operational realities and military conservatism tend to ignore the fact, that by now there is a known, and scientifically proven truth, which is also applicable to POs: Diverse armies are more effective (Lyall, 2020). And although the process is still far from complete and in some areas there are even setbacks in implementation, the operational realities speak for themselves. In the following, the effects of the implementation of the WPS agenda on NATO POs will therefore be exemplarily illustrated and a critical discussion of general trends of WPS implementation within NATO will be addressed contrasting the experiences at the operational level.

2. Structural Design of NATO's WPS Concepts

In 2007, seven years after the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, NATO released a joint policy on implementing the WPS agenda together with the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) (NATO, 2011). Two years later, the so-called Bi-Strategic Command Directive 40-1 (Bi-SC 40-1) was published, which serves as a guideline for mainstreaming gender perspectives throughout NATO structures (NATO, 2009). It operationalizes UNSCR 1325 by mandating the integration of gender considerations into all aspects of NATO missions, including the deployment of Gender Advisors (GENADs) to mission headquarters (NATO, 2009).

However, academic assessments of NATO's implementation of the WPS agenda tend to adopt a critical tone. A central critique is that gender equality

is subordinated to operational effectiveness, thereby reinforcing essentialist gender norms rather than challenging them (von Hlaty 2023, p. 20; Hurley, 2018, pp. 439-440). This instrumental approach risks militarising feminist goals and reducing women's inclusion to a functional means of enhancing mission success (Bastick & Duncanson, 2018, p. 559; Cockburn, 2011, pp. 15 – 17). In this context, the WPS agenda becomes less a tool for structural transformation and more a legitimation of existing patriarchal military structures.

Furthermore, feminist scholars highlight the deep entanglement of gender with military norms and the broader relationship between feminism and militarism. Since the 1990s, feminist research in international relations has exposed how military institutions reproduce binary gender roles: Equating masculinity with strength, violence, and protection, while constructing femininity as passive and in need of safeguarding. From this perspective, some argue that NATO, as a military alliance, may be fundamentally incompatible with genuine feminist goals (for example: Duncanson, 2017, pp. 39 – 58; Cockburn, 2021, pp. 48 – 57; Bastick & Duncanson 2018, pp. 556 – 559).

In practice, NATO's WPS policies are particularly focused on out-of-area operations and POs, such as ISAF or KFOR. While these missions offer potential for operationalising gender perspectives, they are also embedded in complex environments shaped by local cultural, social, and historical dynamics. The implementation of gender norms in such contexts raises critical questions of legitimacy, cultural sensitivity, and the risk of reproducing colonial patterns of intervention, particularly in state-building and the protection of minorities (For critical research on peacekeeping missions see for example: Moreno et al., 2012, pp. 377-392). Feminist perspectives stress that sustainable peacebuilding must involve trust, cooperation, and the inclusion of local actors – especially women (Gordon, 2019, p. 78).

On its core, the implementation of the WPS agenda in NATO's military and civilian structures follows a dual logic. First, the operational effectiveness of NATO missions is to be increased, and second, female representation within NATO is to be enhanced (Wright, 2016). When considering these two objectives, the institutional structure of NATO as a multinational organization must always be taken into account before any analysis or assessment can be made. The composition of personnel in NATO missions is the responsibility of the member states, which deploy their personnel at their own discretion. Given that the European average for female military personnel is around 13%, it is hardly surprising that the proportion of women in NATO troops is similar (European Parliament, 2025). The organization does have direct influence on the recruitment of NICs (NATO International Civilians), but these are only recruited marginally for missions and are mostly deployed in headquarters.

And although individual member states drive WPS forward by incorporating gender-transformative approaches into NATO missions through their national armed forces or, in the case of Sweden, by acting as a hub for

the WPS agenda through the Nordic Centre for Gender in Military Operations, there is simply no critical mass of women in NATO to implement representation in accordance with their own ideals (von Hlaty, 2023, p, 125; Wright, 2016). Some scholars argue, that due to that, a partial decoupling of the WPS agenda from NATO's internal affairs take place, creating a discrepancy between external output and internal structures (Wright, 2016). POs in particular tend to have a credibility problem due to their advocacy role for the WPS agenda in mission countries and the simultaneous slow integration of WPS within NATO (von Hlaty, 2023, p. 5). Nonetheless, the WPS agenda is part of NATO's integrated approach, following a logic that recognises purely military means as insufficient to achieve NATO's operational goals. In NATO's POs, in particular, the WPS agenda is integrated into mission designs and forms part of the impact logic of the missions. The recognition of this central importance of the WPS agenda for NATO's operational effectiveness results in the political will to push ahead with the implementation of the agenda.

Within NATO, the WPS agenda is spearheaded by the Gender Advisors (GENADs) and Gender Focal Points (GFPs) in the missions and the Secretary General's Special Representative on Women, Peace and Security on an institutional level. These roles are intended to raise awareness of gender-related issues and integrate this perspective into strategic and operational planning and action (von Hlaty, 2023, pp. 141-142). However, the roles of GENADs and GFPs are not very differentiated. In contrast to comparable strong positions in the EU or the UN, the NATO GENADs operate based on the NATO Gender Functional Planning Guide, which is rather abstract and closely linked to NATO's primarily military operational logic (von Hlaty, 2023, p. 141). In particular, the role of GENADs has so far been primarily filled by civilians, which leads to fundamental challenges in linking civilian impact logic for NATO missions and their military implementation (Wright, 2016). Nevertheless, in recent years, functional and comprehensive structures have been implemented within the framework of the WPS agenda that can cover all relevant sections of NATO (Bastick & Duncanson, 2018, p. 555).

Various missions were decisive for this development, as their specific gender-based challenges provided lessons for the further development of NATO structures. Particularly noteworthy are the KFOR mission, due to the high relevance of gender-based violence in the conflict; ISAF, a mission in which the role of female soldiers demonstrated key operational effects; and NMI, an advisory mission in which the WPS agenda was integrated into the mission design from its inception (von Hlaty, 2023, p. 125; Hurley, 2018, p. 439; Wright, 2016).

4. Operational Effectiveness

Operational effectiveness through WPS integration is rooted in the gender-specific dynamics of wars. These vary depending on the war and operation. Consequently, the fundamental integration of gender perspectives into strategic and operational planning is instrumental in achieving mission objectives. The conviction that gendered perspectives and the associated greater involvement of women in NATO missions lead to increased effectiveness has been reinforced by numerous examples in recent years.

Female Engagement Teams were deployed in ISAF because they achieved better results in certain operational situations (von Hlaty, 2023, p. 35). Due to the socio-cultural conditions in the Afghanistan theatre of operations, Afghan women's access to and trust in male soldiers was limited. In many cases, however, female soldiers could establish contact and thus obtain essential information (von Hlaty, 2023, p. 35). This information led to a reduction in clashes between NATO soldiers and the civilian population, thereby reducing collateral damage (Bastick & Duncanson, 2018, p. 567). In addition, essential information about social structures and tensions was obtained, which could be used profitably in cooperation with local communities (Bastick & Duncanson, p. 567). This information could be leveraged over the longer course of the mission and led to fundamentally better communication and cooperation with parts of the Afghan population.

The GENADs played a completely different role in NMI. The operational role of the GENADs here consisted primarily of communicating gender perspectives and integrating them into all parts of the mission and thus into the Iraqi armed forces. A key success of the GENADs was the establishment of a framework for gender mainstreaming in the Iraqi Ministry of Defence and other government institutions (von Hlaty, 2023, p. 130). Training and education in particular made it possible to create sustainable structures that can lead to transformative processes. The role of the GENADs was strongly promoted by NATO HQ and SHAPE at NMI, providing considerable support for the complicated task of communicating gender issues to a host country that was relatively reluctant towards gender issues (von Hlaty, 2023, p. 131). Due to the male-dominated institutional culture of the Iraqi Ministry of Defence, workarounds were created to slowly integrate gender issues. For example, the term 'inclusive security' was used instead of 'gender policies' in order to communicate within already familiar conceptual frameworks (von Hlaty, 2023, p. 136). This example illustrates the context-specific adaptability of gender concepts. It can be seen that the impact of GENADs is not only due to visible effects but also to their presence and continuous contribution of gender perspectives. An additional effect of GENADs at NMI arose from exchanges with their counterparts in other organisations in the field, e.g. the UN or NGOs. These exchanges improved interagency cooperation, particularly with civilian stakeholders (von Hltay, 2023, p. 75).

5. Conclusion

In substance, operational effectiveness through WPS integration becomes evident in the shown cases. But the question remains if operational impact can truly create strategic and thus transformative processes. In some of the portrayed cases indicate that change is happing not only on an operational but also on an institutional level.

In ISAF, for example, the Female Engagement Teams helped to give the mission a certain public profile. The visibility of women in uniform not only supported the credibility of the mission's progressive goals but also normalised the association of women with the military (Wrigth, 2016). In the follow-up mission Resolute Support in particular, the continuous progress of WPS implementation could be seen, for example, in the creation of GENADs and their integration into the planning processes (Bastick & Duncanson, 2018, p. 566). A similar trend could be observed in NMI in Iraq. The Iraqi Ministry of Defence, which is traditionally very male-dominated, was confronted by the GENADs with female counterparts who, thanks to their military expertise, were able to play a visibly strong role within military structures in an advisory capacity (von Hlaty, 2023, p. 125). Through the constant presence of women in uniform and the planning role of the GENADs, gender was established as a cross-cutting theme at NMI, ensuring that the goals of the WPS agenda were continuously addressed (von Hlaty, 2023, p. 125). This can also be explained by the successful integration of the GENADs at NMI, which, unlike in KFOR, were part of the mission from the outset (von Hlaty, 2023, p. 126).

These examples show that since the adoption of the WPS Agenda by NATO, GENADs have been successfully integrated as key institutional elements in many areas, thus creating a continuous approach to gender perspectives and gender sensitivity (Bastick & Duncanson, 2018, p. 566). Nevertheless, the process is slow, as the focus on NATO's operational effectiveness as a premise develops the transformation of NATO as an institution along an output logic, thereby keeping the fundamental gender-transformative discussion away from the core of NATO. In terms of output, however, NATO has transformative leverage over states in which it operates at their invitation by linking its support to a commitment to, or at least openness towards, the values of the WPS agenda (von Hlaty, 2023, p. 136). Within NATO, however, the leverage lies in the operational effectiveness of gender-sensitive mission design, and thus a great responsibility lies with the GENADs to transfer operational arguments into institutional logic.

With NATO's 2024 WPS Policy NATO once again reaffirmed its commitment to the WPS Agenda. Along the key principles of gender-responsive leadership and accountability, participation, prevention and protection this recent document drives institutional and operational development within NATO (NATO, 2024 A).

There is a lot of criticism not only of Resolution 1325, but also of its implementation in various institutions. This criticism comes from all sides – in particular from feminists (too little feminism, too much military) and conservatives (too many values, too little reality). However, based on the examples presented, especially in the case of NATO as a military-political organization, it becomes clear that when implementing Resolution 1325, or on a larger scale when considering and integrating diverse aspects and perspectives of human interaction, the operational effect outweighs structural inertia and can also fuel structural processes. Or, to put it another way, openness to restructuring and improvement is beneficial for everyone and thus contributes to NATO's overall goal: security for all.

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