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The Role of Women in United Nations Peace-keeping

Introduction

Since its founding in 1945, a central purpose of the United Nations has been
the maintenance of global peace and security. The United Nations role and
function in peace-keeping missions has expanded greatly since the "Blue
Helmets" were first dispatched in 1957. Following the cold war, United Nations
operations to maintain international peace and security, as defined by the
Secretary-General in the 1992 Agenda for Peace, have expanded and become
increasingly complex. Moreover, UN peace-keeping operations have come to
account for the largest share of the Organization's expenditures.

UN peace-keeping missions today include more non-military/civilian components
for preventive diplomacy, conflict resolution, peacemaking and post-conflict
peace-building. These civilian components have meant a broadening in the range
of personnel and skills deployed beyond the traditional military.

The expanding participation of women in UN peace-keeping is the subject of
this issue of women 2000. Two questions are addressed: the question of gender
balance in UN peace-keeping, and the question of a women's perspective on
peace-keeping and the influence which women may have on peace-keeping as a
result of this perspective. In relation to the issue of gender balance, two
hypotheses are explored. One is that special measures (e.g., affirmative
action) are needed to produce greater gender balance in peace-keeping. The
second is that gender balance in peace-keeping operations contributes to more
effective peace-keeping.

This article first examines why women have remained largely excluded from
military and police roles in UN peace-keeping operations and then analyses
apparent reasons for their limited participation in the civilian components of
peace-keeping missions. It also analyses why, in the non-military areas of UN
peace-keeping, women have increasingly made a contribution, but largely as
members of the rank and file, not in decision-making positions. The article
documents the trends in women's participation in peace-keeping, which show a
slight increase in recent years, and explores possible explanations for these
trends.

UN peace-keeping - where are the women "blue helmets"?

Since its founding 50 years ago, the United Nations has undertaken a total of
36 peace-keeping operations, 20 of which have taken place since 1988. In
total, peace-keeping missions have involved more than 720,000 personnel from
77 Member States, including UN staff, at a cost of more than US\$12.4 billion.
In 1995, some 69,356 military and civilian police personnel are serving in the
17 active military peace-keeping operations.1 Article 8 of the Charter of the
United Nations calls for equal participation of men and women in the work of
the Organization. Yet, almost no women have served in the military contingents