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EXPERTS TAKE

'To increase the chances that peace will last, you need to have women involved'

An Interview with
LENA SUNDH

With United Nations (UN) Peacekeeping marking its 75th anniversary in 2023, ISDP's Clara Stähler and Tove Jalmerud, interns of the Asia Program and the Stockholm China Center, sat down with Swedish diplomat (retd.) Lena Sundh, to discuss her professional experience and the broader significance of women's participation in peacekeeping operations and their representation in this critical field. Since the adoption of the Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) in 2000 – which highlighted the importance of women's full participation in peace and security processes – efforts have been made to bolster women's engagement in peacekeeping, but women are still underrepresented in this area.

Lena Sundh is a retired Swedish diplomat who brings a wealth of experience in peace, stability, conflict resolution, and gender equality to our discussion. She carries years of experience in the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the UN, at which she has served in various key positions such as the Ambassador to Angola, Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General to the Democratic Republic of Congo with MONUC, and Head of Office of the UN High Commissioner



for Human Rights in Nepal. Her commitment to international diplomacy and human rights has made a significant impact on various conflicts and peace efforts.

Tove Jalmerud: With your extensive background in diplomacy, conflict resolution, and the UN, we'd like to delve into your experiences regarding WPS. Could you share your perspective on the WPS agenda and how your journey in diplomacy and conflict resolution led you to engage with it?

Lena Sundh: In my professional work both for the Swedish MFA and the UN, I often worked on issues relating to peace and security, mainly conflict resolution, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding. I could see with my own eyes that such processes seldom included women. I therefore very much welcomed Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000.

The mandate of the Security Council is to maintain international peace and security; it has no mandate as such to deal with equality. That is why I always maintain that the primary objective of Resolution 1325 is peace and security, not equality. Its adoption is a recognition by the Security Council that women are necessary for sustainable peace. However, if you have women involved in peace negotiations, implementation of peace agreements, and security issues in general, you not only strengthen the possibilities of peace but also make women visible and influential – it gives them a standing in society. I believe that this also supports gender equality. If you want to increase the chances that the peace will last, and if you want to see the society develop, you need to have women involved. This has also been backed up by academic research. This is why I believe it is particularly important that women are included in the implementation of peace agreements. That's where it makes the biggest difference because that is where you often discuss how to build your future society in peace, and it is absolutely essential to have women involved in that. But in order to have women as part of the implementation process, there must be something in the peace agreement stating that women should be part of it. If women partake in the negotiations, then it's more likely that something like that is included. Also, peace negotiations are so

important because you become “someone” if you're part of them. And I like women to be “someone”. Women must become visible and be listened to.

Clara Ståbler: Throughout your career, you spent a lot of time working in conflict zones. How did you engage with peacekeeping missions or personnel? Did you meet many women in peacekeeping during your time in these conflict zones? And did you observe an increase in the presence of women or the positions they occupied within the peacekeeping missions over your career especially with resolution 1325 being implemented in 2000?

Sundh: The first peacekeeping I followed very closely was in Angola in 1995. I was there, not as a member of the Mission but as the Swedish ambassador to Angola. However, I interacted a lot with peacekeeping during my time in Angola, as I was part of an informal group, a kind of “Group of Friends”, which supported the work of the Mission. Groups of Friends are often created around various issues, not least to support the work in countries in conflict, post-conflict, etc. As different countries would be part of such groups, the group can, for example, use their networks and connections to put pressure on the various parties, e.g., government or rebel groups involved in a conflict, to adhere to an agreement and help the peacekeeping mission this way. They can also help with financial contributions when such is needed.

In Angola at the time of the peace process, there was a strong women's organization linked to the ruling party, as well as some women, including in senior positions, in the Angolan military and political leadership. So, women were not totally invisible in that conflict, but they were not visible in the negotiation processes. In the peacekeeping mission, there were very few women. They served as political affairs or human rights officers but none of them at a more senior level. Again, this was in 1995, and Resolution 1325 was only adopted in 2000. But when I served in the Peacekeeping Mission MONUC¹ in

the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which was after the adoption of Resolution 1325, there were more women who occupied senior positions. I was the deputy head of the mission – the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General. The spokesperson and head of public information, the head of humanitarian affairs, the head of child protection, and the head of the Gender Office were women. There were also women in political affairs, administration, etc. The civilian component of the mission is where the majority of women work. There were also some women in uniform, but not many.

In the last ten years, a lot of women's mediation networks have been created partly with the objective

to show that there are competent women who can take up important roles and also support women in conflict-affected areas who want to become part of peace processes, for example, African Femwise, Mediterranean Women's Network, Nordic Women Mediators, which I am a member of, and others.

Stähler: Women engaged in peacekeeping missions are often asserted to serve as impactful role models and symbols of empowerment for other women who live in conflict-affected areas. What is your perspective on this argument?

Sundh: I agree that women in peacekeeping missions can be important role models for women in conflict-

Types of personnel in UN peacekeeping missions

UN peacekeeping missions consist of uniformed (military and police) and civilian personnel.

UN military

The original responsibility of the UN military is to protect the mission. Today, their mandate has expanded to the protection of civilians. *Military observers* play a crucial role within the military staff as they operate in small teams strategically deployed to monitor ceasefires or force disengagement. Engaging with local communities, these observers gather vital knowledge essential for mission success. Their interactions serve as a valuable conduit for information exchange, building a stronger connection between the mission and the communities. The gathered information forms the basis of reports guiding the strategic direction of the mission.

→ Proportion of women in the UN military (as of 2022): 21 percent ²

UN police

The UN police consists of formed units and the civilian police. The formed units of the police have security-related tasks and work in their own unit from the same country, consisting of maybe a hundred people. Civilian police primarily engage in tasks such as training and monitoring national police forces within a mission. Their role extends beyond direct enforcement, encompassing critical responsibilities in building capacity, fostering professional development, and overseeing the activities of local law enforcement entities.

→ Proportion of women in the UN police (as of 2022): 32 percent ³

Civilian personnel

The civilian component of UN peacekeeping missions can be divided into two groups: One focuses on tasks such as safeguarding human rights, reinforcing the rule of law, facilitating political reconciliation, affairs, and political reconciliation, and serving as public information officers to explain and garner support for UN peace efforts. The other group is involved in administration by providing support in areas like finance, logistics, communication, technology, and human resources. Civilians may serve as international or national staff, UN Volunteers, consultants, or contractors and play an integral role in promoting peace and security.

→ Proportion of women in the civilian personnel (as of 2022): 33 percent ⁴

affected areas. I remember visiting Monrovia at the time of UNMIL. The mission had an Indian police unit consisting of women. I was told that these fabulous role models had motivated Liberian women to want to become police officers themselves. Still, it is important to remember that while the international community can assist efforts to improve gender equality in countries affected by conflict, it is the women in the conflict-affected areas themselves that will have to drive the change in the end.

Jalmerud: In your perspective, how has the integration of more female peacekeepers impacted peacekeeping missions? In which aspects or components of these missions have women peacekeepers made the most substantial impact? For example, can any discernible effects be seen when missions deploy all-female or mixed-gender troops?

Sundh: When it comes to women in the military troops, the number of women is still low, which reflects the fact that women generally are relatively few in national defense forces as well. I believe though, that the military forces are not necessarily the most important components for women to be included in. The troops don't communicate much with people and are under their own command in their barracks. They are mainly there to protect the rest of the UN mission and, when possible, also protect the civilian population. The military observers, however, often work in mixed national teams, and they are often deployed in areas or towns where there is no other presence of the Mission. These teams communicate directly with the

population. To have women included in such teams, or to have women peacekeepers linked to them is important. This will enhance the reach-out of the Mission.

In some societies, it is difficult for male peacekeepers to interact with the women of conflict-affected communities. Female peacekeepers can, by talking to the women, gather valuable information for the mission, including potential threats, troop movements, and activities of other armed groups. I believe the knowledge and perspective of the women living in conflict-affected areas is often underestimated, especially regarding their understanding of the situation on the ground. This particularly applies when it comes to rape and sexual violence, as women may feel more comfortable sharing sensitive information with female peacekeepers. For example, the women living in conflict-affected areas can tell the peacekeepers where a military contingent needs to patrol in order to secure locations that women and girls regularly visit and where they are in danger of rape and sexual violence. This could mean helping the women to do their chores or the girls to safely reach their schools. In the DRC, they tried to do that – they listened to the women. There was this understanding that if you want to do a good job of protecting civilians as a military, you have to talk to the women living in the area. Where do they move, and where are the dangers? That is just one example, but there are, of course, many other instances where women's involvement helps improve the situation on the ground.

I remember being told, by a commander from an observer mission, that an all-women military

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observer team once received information from women living there about a huge arms cash, which the Mission would probably not have been informed about otherwise. In society, both men and women contribute, and even if women are often undervalued, their significance in peace efforts is undeniable.

Jalmerud: Have you noticed any gender-related challenges for women peacekeepers, and if so, could you tell us about them?

Sundb: Over the years there have been many women who have felt that they were not taken seriously. There has also been sexual harassment, an issue that has been taken more seriously at the highest level now. Since I'm not actively following these questions anymore, I cannot tell for sure if it has improved, but hopefully it has.

But well intentioned actions and decisions can also be wrong. During my time in MONUC, there was a decision taken that the staff had to accept being deployed all over the mission area, i.e. also outside of Kinshasa. Our director of administration wrote a memo saying that all staff members had to accept deployment anywhere in the mission area, with one exception: women did not have to go to the town Mbandaka. I had been to Mbandaka, where the MONUC office was rough and where the toilets were awful. I asked the Director if this exception was due to the toilets, and the answer was yes. I told him that the toilets must be fixed. One cannot allow women to avoid deployment only because it is nasty. After all, that could give the impression that women get preferential treatment as they would only be going to nice and comfortable places. In addition, that could also take away from career opportunities because a place that faces you with hardship can also be interesting. Women should be able to make that choice themselves – and men also deserve decent sanitary conditions. So, the decision was changed. Sometimes, women have to fight different kinds of problems and nastiness, and sometimes, they may have to fight be-

ing pampered if they want to be taken seriously.

Stähler: I find the part about not being taken seriously interesting. I read a few articles describing how women in the military components said that they felt a need to work harder than their male counterparts describing an atmosphere that made them feel that they were not taken as seriously as their male colleagues. Can you share your experience with this and how you personally encountered or navigated through such situations?

Sundb: The military components of a peacekeeping mission are kept together nation by nation. I suspect that the women who felt they had to work twice as hard as the men would encounter the same challenges when being on their own home soil. A peacekeeping mission is very hierarchically structured, and since I was part of the senior leadership as the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General, I did not have to worry that much about this aspect. But then what they said behind my back, I don't know, but I did not have to know.

Stähler: While progress has been made, the gender distribution within UN peacekeeping personnel continues to display an imbalance, with a higher percentage of women serving in the civilian component (33 percent) and police forces (32 percent) compared to the military component (22 percent). Yet, many countries are not successful in boosting female participation in their military and defense forces (often around 10 percent for most European countries). Do you believe that addressing the underrepresentation of women in the military should primarily be tackled at the national level?

Sundb: There you have it, because the UN military is not UN-employed; it's the member-states that deploy the troops. I remember when Sweden did its first National Action Plan (NAP) to implement Resolution 1325, one of the goals was that there should be at least as many women percentage-wise in the Swedish

military contingents as there were women in the Swedish Defense Force. That was only 8 percent at the time, and not even that was easy to achieve in a military contingent. Many women wanting to be part of a UN peacekeeping mission are also mothers and have difficulty combining both roles. Maybe that is changing now with the break-up of traditional gender roles, but it used to be easier for a man to say, “Okay, now, I’m gone for six months; you take care of the family”.

Stähler: Looking ahead, what are the priorities for the international community, governments, or stakeholders to get more women to participate in peacekeeping? Regarding what the UN could do, do you think it’s mainly investing in more parity-oriented recruitment?

Sundh: The UN is already trying to increase the percentage of women in peacekeeping, but I think more efforts are needed. The UN could enhance outreach and public relations initiatives to encourage more women to apply. Usually, there are many qualified applicants. I have encountered instances where capable women expressed interest but were not recruited. There could be many reasons for that, the competition is often hard, but there is a need for internal efforts in the UN to recognize and prioritize the value of having women partake in peacekeeping missions. However, addressing the percentage of women in military personnel falls primarily under the responsibility of troop-contributing countries, and it is up to these states to actively focus on increasing the inclusion of women in their contingents.

Jalmerud: Speaking of applications, do you think some people could be deterred from participating in peacekeeping missions because they might fear that they will be faced with a disproportionate number of hardships compared to other jobs? Especially given the gender-related challenges for female peacekeepers that we discussed, is there a general perception that the environment in peacekeeping missions is not particularly women-friendly?

Sundh: Yes, one reason is probably that it is perceived to be tougher than it really is. Some people might initially view it as closed-off or unfamiliar, only to discover that, in reality, it often resembles a typical office job, albeit in a different environment. If you work in a peacekeeping mission as a civilian, you will generally have a good office, and the security situation is constantly assessed, which people might not know. It can sound more dangerous or challenging than it is. I do think the preconception of the work environment for women in peacekeeping could be suffering from a perception problem. You can go to any workplace, and you don’t really know how it will be there for women. But it is also true that being in a Mission means that you are away from family and friends and your regular networks, which can make you more vulnerable, which is true for both women and men.

Stähler: A final aspect we’d like to turn to is the role of states in advancing the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, particularly through the formulation of National Action Plans (NAPs) on WPS. How do you perceive NAPs as mechanisms for increasing women’s participation in peacekeeping

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efforts? In your view, does the presence or absence of a NAP influence your assessment of how a country addresses WPS and the involvement of women in peacekeeping?

Sundh: I think that if a country has a National Action Plan it shows that they take the issue of Women, Peace, and Security with some seriousness. But it is then important that it really is a government document that has at support of the ministries and agencies concerned, including the defense force and the police. It needs to be respected. Because it can easily be a superficial document that is only paid lip service to.

However, I believe that, in general, National Action Plans have helped to raise awareness around Resolution 1325 and WPS. I also think that now, every time the Secretary-General reports to the Security Council on the peacekeeping missions, the missions know that in their background documentation, they have to include the issue of Women, Peace, and Security. Because of these requests for reporting, I believe the WPS has become a more important part of the mission's work.

Jalmerud: And, to conclude, do you have any last statement that you would like to add to our conversation?

Sundh: When I work on Women, Peace, and Security, I see women peacekeepers, military and civilian, as one means to help ensure that women who are affected by conflict become part of the solutions. Women from that country or region need to feel that they can be part of the solution. As a foreign international civil servant, one should always remember that wherever you come from –

National Action Plans on Women, Peace, and Security are policy documents where states outline their national-level strategy to implement the WPS agenda on a domestic and international level. Since the adoption of Resolution 1325 in 2000, 55% of UN Member States have formulated National Action Plans on how they will implement the resolution. As of 2022, about 30% of the National Action Plans have expired.⁵

your task is to support finding a solution – but the solution itself will have to be found by the nationals of the country affected by the conflict.

When working in the DRC I often thought, “I’m a Swede – what am I doing in the Congo? Is it not better for peacekeepers from the Central African region to work here because they would understand the conflict better?”. But it can also happen that those affected by conflicts sometimes prefer assistance from people from further away rather than their neighboring countries since they are sometimes seen as more neutral.

In this context, it is also important to bear in mind that there often is a reluctance to accept what is seen as “Western values”. I believe that “Westerners” very often make their values into truth, and sometimes they are not everybody’s truth. I think this is not ill-intentioned, but one can get very stuck in one’s own values and think that they embody all the answers. There are enough unsuccessful peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts to evidence that this is not necessarily correct.

Endnotes

- 1 MONUC stands for the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo. MONUC was renamed the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) in 2010.
- 2 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, “Women in Multilatera; Peace Operations in 2022: What is the State of Play?” 2022, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/women_in_multilateral_peace_operations_in_2022-what_is_the_state_of_play.pdf (accessed December 11, 2023).
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Women, Peace and Security Programme of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, “National Action Plans: At a Glance,” 1325 NAPs, 2023, <https://1325naps.peacewomen.org/> (accessed December 11, 2023).