



Gender, Security, and Defense Diplomacy: The Strategic Role of Female Engagement Teams in UN Peacekeeping Missions

*Gender, Keamanan, dan Diploması Pertahanan:
Peran Strategis Female Engagement Teams dalam Misi Perdamaian PBB*

Eka Triastuti, Moch Afifuddin, Rudy Sutanto, Muhamamd Halkis
Indonesia Defence University
email; eka.triastuti@gmail.com

Abstract. The increasing complexity of contemporary peacekeeping environments has compelled United Nations (UN) missions to adopt operational approaches that extend beyond conventional kinetic security frameworks. Modern operations are conducted within contexts characterized by asymmetric threats, fragmented authority structures, and socially embedded civilian vulnerabilities. Within this multidimensional landscape, gender integration has emerged not merely as a normative commitment but as a strategic-operational necessity. This study examines the strategic role of Female Engagement Teams (FET) in UN peacekeeping missions, drawing upon qualitative-empirical analysis of primary operational documentation from Indonesia's Rapidly Deployable Battalion (RDB), Satgas BGC TNI Konga XXXIX-C MONUSCO. Departing from predominantly normative interpretations of gender participation, the study adopts a capability-centered analytical perspective. The findings demonstrate that FET deployment produces disproportionate strategic effects through mechanisms of legitimacy formation, engagement access expansion, relational intelligence enhancement, and non-kinetic influence. Operational evidence indicates that FETs function as active capability-bearing units embedded within core mission activities, contributing directly to civilian protection, trust-building processes, and conflict de-escalation dynamics. The analysis further reveals that gender-responsive engagement enhances mission legitimacy, which in turn strengthens trust-mediated civilian cooperation and improves situational awareness. The study advances three principal contributions. First, it reconceptualizes gender integration as operational rationality rather than symbolic compliance. Second, it extends peacekeeping effectiveness literature by empirically linking gendered capabilities with measurable strategic outcomes. Third, it broadens defense diplomacy theory by conceptualizing FETs as hybrid instruments of non-kinetic strategic influence. In asymmetric and socially fragmented conflict environments, the strategic utility of peacekeeping forces increasingly resides in their capacity to generate legitimacy, trust, and relational credibility. Female Engagement Teams exemplify this transformation, illustrating

how gender-responsive military capabilities enhance both operational effectiveness and defense diplomacy objectives.

Keywords. Female Engagement Teams; Gender Integration; UN Peacekeeping; Defense Diplomacy; Human Security; Civilian Protection; Non-Kinetic Influence; Peacekeeping Effectiveness.

Abstrak. Meningkatnya kompleksitas lingkungan operasi perdamaian kontemporer telah mendorong misi Perserikatan Bangsa-Bangsa (PBB) untuk mengadopsi pendekatan operasional yang melampaui kerangka keamanan konvensional berbasis kekuatan kinetik. Operasi modern dilaksanakan dalam konteks yang ditandai oleh ancaman asimetris, struktur otoritas yang terfragmentasi, serta kerentanan sipil yang tertanam secara sosial. Dalam lanskap multidimensional ini, integrasi gender muncul tidak semata sebagai komitmen normatif, tetapi sebagai kebutuhan strategis-operasional. Penelitian ini mengkaji peran strategis Female Engagement Teams (FET) dalam misi perdamaian PBB melalui analisis kualitatif-empiris terhadap dokumentasi operasional primer dari Rapidly Deployable Battalion (RDB) Indonesia, Satgas BGC TNI Konga XXXIX-C MONUSCO. Berangkat dari dominasi interpretasi normatif mengenai partisipasi gender, studi ini mengadopsi perspektif analitis yang berpusat pada kapabilitas. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pelibatan FET menghasilkan efek strategis yang tidak proporsional melalui mekanisme pembentukan legitimasi, perluasan akses keterlibatan, penguatan kecerdasan relasional, serta pengaruh non-kinetik. Bukti operasional mengindikasikan bahwa FET berfungsi sebagai unit aktif pembawa kapabilitas yang terintegrasi dalam aktivitas inti misi, berkontribusi langsung terhadap perlindungan warga sipil, pembangunan kepercayaan, dan dinamika de-eskalasi konflik. Analisis lebih lanjut memperlihatkan bahwa keterlibatan responsif gender memperkuat legitimasi misi, yang pada gilirannya meningkatkan kerja sama sipil berbasis kepercayaan serta memperbaiki kesadaran situasional. Penelitian ini menawarkan tiga kontribusi utama. Pertama, penelitian merekonseptualisasi integrasi gender sebagai rasionalitas operasional, bukan sekadar kepatuhan simbolik. Kedua, penelitian memperluas literatur efektivitas peacekeeping dengan menghubungkan kapabilitas gender dengan hasil strategis yang terukur. Ketiga, penelitian memperkaya teori diplomasi pertahanan dengan memposisikan FET sebagai instrumen hibrida pengaruh strategis non-kinetik. Dalam lingkungan konflik yang asimetris dan terfragmentasi secara sosial, nilai strategis pasukan perdamaian semakin ditentukan oleh kemampuan mereka dalam membangun legitimasi, kepercayaan, dan kredibilitas relasional. Female Engagement Teams merepresentasikan transformasi tersebut, menunjukkan bagaimana kapabilitas militer responsif gender memperkuat efektivitas operasional sekaligus tujuan diplomasi pertahanan.

Kata Kunci. Female Engagement Teams; Integrasi Gender; Operasi Perdamaian PBB; Diplomasi Pertahanan; Keamanan Manusia; Perlindungan Warga Sipil; Pengaruh Non-Kinetik; Efektivitas Peacekeeping.



Introduction

The evolving character of contemporary conflict has fundamentally reshaped the operational logic of United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions. Contemporary security environments are increasingly defined by asymmetric threats, protracted intrastate conflicts, hybrid violence, and the erosion of centralized authority structures rather than conventional interstate warfare (Kaldor, 2013; Berdal & Ucko, 2015). These transformations have compelled peacekeeping operations to transcend traditional security paradigms centered on ceasefire monitoring and buffer-zone stabilization. Modern missions are now tasked with multidimensional mandates encompassing civilian protection, conflict prevention, stabilization, human rights promotion, and support for state legitimacy (United Nations, 2020).

Within these complex operational environments, security challenges are inseparable from social dynamics. Fragmented authority, localized armed groups, identity-based violence, and persistent civilian vulnerability require engagement strategies that integrate military effectiveness with sociocultural sensitivity (Autesserre, 2014). Peacekeeping forces are no longer evaluated solely by their capacity to deter violence through force projection, but also by their ability to cultivate trust, legitimacy, and relational credibility among local populations (Howard, 2019). In such contexts, gender integration has emerged not merely as a normative obligation but as a strategic operational necessity.

The recognition of gender as a critical dimension of peace and security is institutionally embedded within the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, inaugurated by United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 (United Nations Security Council, 2000). Subsequent resolutions—including UNSCR 1820, 1888, 1889, and 2242—have progressively reinforced the operational relevance of gender perspectives, emphasizing that sustainable peace is contingent upon inclusive participation, protection from gender-based violence, and gender-responsive institutional practices (Shepherd, 2016). Importantly, the WPS framework has evolved beyond representational concerns, increasingly highlighting the functional contributions of gender integration to mission effectiveness (Karim & Beardsley, 2017).

Despite this institutional recognition, scholarly discourse has frequently framed gender participation within peacekeeping primarily through equality, representation, and normative legitimacy narratives (Whitworth, 2004; Kirby & Shepherd, 2016). While these dimensions remain essential, they risk underestimating the strategic and operational implications of gender-responsive capabilities. Emerging empirical



research indicates that gender integration yields measurable security benefits. Studies demonstrate that female peacekeepers enhance community engagement, improve information flows, reduce incidents of misconduct, and strengthen perceptions of mission legitimacy (Gizelis & Karim, 2020; Karim, 2020). Gender-diverse units are associated with improved civilian cooperation and heightened operational credibility, particularly within civilian protection mandates (Karim & Beardsley, 2016).

Within this evolving operational landscape, Female Engagement Teams (FET) represent one of the most consequential yet under-theorized innovations in contemporary peacekeeping practice. Initially conceptualized as a pragmatic response to engagement barriers in culturally restrictive environments, FETs have gradually assumed broader strategic functions extending beyond facilitative interaction roles (Dharmapuri, 2013). Their deployment reflects a shift from viewing gender inclusion as demographic diversity toward recognizing gender as a distinct operational capability.

Peacekeeping environments characterized by sociocultural sensitivities often impose structural constraints on conventional military engagement. In many societies affected by conflict, gender norms restrict interaction between male soldiers and local women, thereby limiting access to critical social information networks (Jennings, 2011). These constraints generate operational blind spots affecting intelligence acquisition, civilian protection, and trust-building processes. FETs mitigate such limitations by enabling culturally adaptive communication channels, facilitating engagement with populations otherwise inaccessible to traditional units (UN DPO, 2020).

Empirical studies reinforce the strategic implications of such engagement. Autesserre (2014) argues that peacekeeping effectiveness is profoundly shaped by micro-level social interactions rather than solely by formal mandates or force configurations. Trust, legitimacy, and local perceptions function as decisive variables influencing mission outcomes. FETs contribute directly to these relational dynamics by fostering community trust, enhancing dialogue, and reducing psychological barriers associated with armed forces presence (Karim, 2020). Their role therefore transcends symbolic inclusion, constituting a mechanism of influence embedded within operational practice.

The strategic significance of FET deployment becomes particularly evident within civilian protection frameworks. Protection of Civilians (PoC), now central to many UN mandates, depends not only upon deterrence capacity but also upon early threat detection, community cooperation, and situational awareness (United Nations,



2020). Contemporary threats frequently emerge through localized patterns of violence, coercion, and social fragmentation that evade purely kinetic or technological surveillance mechanisms (Howard, 2019). Effective PoC strategies therefore require intelligence derived from relational trust and community engagement.

FETs enhance these dynamics by expanding access to community-derived information networks. Research demonstrates that women within conflict-affected societies often possess distinct knowledge of security conditions, social tensions, and emerging risks (Gizelis & Karim, 2020). Engagement facilitated by FETs enables the extraction of early warning indicators, localized threat assessments, and nuanced understanding of civilian vulnerabilities. This form of intelligence differs qualitatively from conventional reconnaissance, relying upon social proximity rather than observational dominance (Karim & Beardsley, 2017).

Moreover, FET operations generate legitimacy effects critical to stabilization processes. Legitimacy in peacekeeping contexts functions as a force multiplier, influencing civilian cooperation, reducing hostility, and enhancing mission sustainability (Howard, 2019). Gender-responsive engagement signals sensitivity, inclusivity, and sociocultural awareness, thereby reinforcing perceptions of impartiality and credibility (Kirby & Shepherd, 2016). Such perceptions are particularly consequential in asymmetric environments where military presence may otherwise be interpreted through lenses of coercion or foreign intrusion.

The strategic utility of FETs also extends into conflict de-escalation and disengagement processes. Contemporary peacekeeping missions increasingly operate within environments populated by non-state armed groups whose behavior is influenced by perceptions of risk, legitimacy, and engagement pathways (Berdal & Ucko, 2015). Non-kinetic mechanisms—dialogue, persuasion, and trust-building—often prove more sustainable than purely coercive approaches. FETs contribute to these processes by facilitating communication, reducing tensions, and supporting reintegration initiatives, particularly when female combatants or gender-sensitive issues are involved (Dharmapuri, 2013).

From a defense diplomacy perspective, FETs can be conceptualized as micro-level instruments of strategic influence. Defense diplomacy emphasizes the use of military resources to achieve political and diplomatic objectives through cooperation, legitimacy, and engagement rather than coercion (Cottey & Forster, 2004). Within peacekeeping missions, military actors operate as agents of international legitimacy, stability, and governance support. FETs amplify these diplomatic functions by



enhancing social credibility, expanding engagement networks, and generating non-kinetic influence effects.

This analytical reframing challenges conventional dichotomies separating normative gender integration from operational effectiveness. Empirical evidence increasingly supports the proposition that gender-responsive capabilities produce measurable strategic outcomes (Karim & Beardsley, 2017; Gizelis & Karim, 2020). Gender integration thus emerges not solely as ethical compliance but as operational rationality aligned with contemporary security demands.

In light of these considerations, this study situates Female Engagement Teams within broader transformations in peacekeeping doctrine and practice. By grounding analysis in empirical operational contexts, it highlights how gender-responsive engagement contributes directly to mission legitimacy, civilian protection, intelligence acquisition, and defense diplomacy objectives. In asymmetric, socially fragmented environments, operational success increasingly depends upon relational trust, sociocultural adaptability, and legitimacy-based influence—domains where FET deployment demonstrates disproportionate strategic value.

Literature Review

The integration of gender perspectives into peacekeeping operations has progressively evolved from a normative concern into an operationally significant research domain within security studies. Early scholarly debates were largely framed within feminist international relations (IR) theory, emphasizing the structural marginalization of women in military institutions and peace processes (Tickner, 1992; Whitworth, 2004). These foundational works problematized the masculinized nature of security discourse, arguing that traditional peacekeeping doctrines reproduced gender hierarchies while overlooking the differentiated experiences of conflict across gender lines.

Subsequent developments within the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, particularly following United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, catalyzed a shift toward institutional and policy-oriented analyses (United Nations Security Council, 2000). Research during this phase frequently focused on descriptive representation, examining patterns of female participation in peacekeeping missions and identifying persistent barriers to gender inclusion (Olsson & Tryggstad, 2001; Jennings, 2011). While this body of literature established the normative legitimacy of gender integration, its analytical emphasis remained largely



centered on equality, rights, and participation metrics rather than operational consequences.

A more consequential shift emerged as scholars began interrogating the functional implications of gender integration. Empirical studies increasingly challenged assumptions that gender inclusion constituted primarily symbolic compliance. Karim and Beardsley (2016, 2017) demonstrated that gender diversity within peacekeeping contingents correlates with improved operational outcomes, including enhanced civilian cooperation and reduced instances of misconduct. Their findings suggest that female peacekeepers contribute to mission effectiveness through mechanisms of legitimacy and trust-building rather than merely demographic diversity.

Parallel research further reinforced this instrumental perspective. Gizelis and Karim (2020) argue that female peacekeepers facilitate access to local populations, particularly women, thereby improving information acquisition and community engagement. Such engagement is critical within multidimensional mandates emphasizing Protection of Civilians (PoC), conflict prevention, and stabilization. Howard (2019) similarly highlights that peacekeeping success increasingly depends upon relational dynamics, local legitimacy, and micro-level social interactions rather than force projection alone. Within this framework, gender-responsive capabilities become operationally indispensable.

Despite growing empirical evidence, significant conceptual gaps persist. Much of the literature continues to treat female participation as an aggregated variable without adequately differentiating specialized gender-responsive units such as Female Engagement Teams (FET). Existing analyses often emphasize individual-level participation rather than unit-level capability transformation. Dharmapuri (2013) provides one of the few early examinations of gender integration as operational necessity, arguing that female personnel expand engagement pathways, particularly in culturally restrictive environments. However, systematic theoretical elaboration of FETs as strategic actors remains limited.

The broader peacekeeping effectiveness literature offers complementary insights. Autesserre (2014) critiques macro-level institutional analyses, emphasizing that mission outcomes are profoundly shaped by everyday interactions between peacekeepers and local populations. Legitimacy, trust, and sociocultural sensitivity emerge as decisive variables influencing cooperation and stability. Gender-responsive engagement mechanisms, including FET deployments, directly intersect with these



dynamics by facilitating culturally adaptive communication and reducing barriers associated with militarized presence.

Human security scholarship further strengthens this analytical trajectory. Kaldor (2013) conceptualizes contemporary conflicts as “new wars,” characterized by blurred distinctions between combatants and civilians, identity-based violence, and persistent insecurity. In such environments, security provision cannot be separated from social legitimacy and civilian trust. Gendered vulnerabilities, including conflict-related sexual violence and exclusion from decision-making processes, are integral components of insecurity (Shepherd, 2016). Gender-responsive operational capabilities therefore function as mechanisms addressing structural dimensions of civilian vulnerability.

Additionally, studies examining intelligence and information dynamics underscore the strategic relevance of gender integration. Karim and Beardsley (2017) argue that community engagement enhances situational awareness and early threat detection. Female peacekeepers often possess unique access to social information networks, particularly within gender-segregated societies (Gizelis & Karim, 2020). This relational intelligence contrasts with traditional surveillance-based models, emphasizing trust-mediated information flows.

From a defense diplomacy perspective, however, the literature remains comparatively underdeveloped. Defense diplomacy traditionally emphasizes the use of military resources to generate political influence, legitimacy, and cooperative security effects (Cottey & Forster, 2004). While peacekeeping operations are frequently acknowledged as instruments of soft power and international legitimacy, gender-responsive units are rarely conceptualized within defense diplomacy frameworks. Most analyses treat gender integration as normative compliance rather than strategic influence mechanism.

Recent scholarship on military legitimacy and non-kinetic influence provides pathways for theoretical integration. Studies highlight that credibility, trust, and social acceptance function as force multipliers within stabilization operations (Howard, 2019). Gender-responsive engagement contributes directly to these legitimacy effects, suggesting that FETs may operate as micro-level diplomatic actors embedded within military structures. This interpretation aligns with evolving understandings of contemporary military power emphasizing persuasion, credibility, and relational influence (Berdal & Ucko, 2015).

Nevertheless, empirical studies examining FET-specific mechanisms remain scarce. Much of the evidence is derived from aggregated gender diversity metrics



rather than specialized engagement teams. Consequently, the strategic functions of FETs – including conflict de-escalation, civilian protection enhancement, and social intelligence acquisition – remain insufficiently theorized. This gap is particularly pronounced in analyses linking gender-responsive units with measurable operational outcomes.

Furthermore, tensions persist between normative and instrumental interpretations of gender integration. Feminist scholars caution against purely utilitarian framings that risk reducing gender inclusion to operational efficiency metrics (Kirby & Shepherd, 2016). However, emerging empirical research suggests that normative legitimacy and operational effectiveness are mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory (Karim & Beardsley, 2017). Gender integration enhances legitimacy, which in turn improves operational performance.

In light of these debates, this study situates Female Engagement Teams within intersecting literatures on peacekeeping effectiveness, human security, gender integration, and defense diplomacy. Existing research establishes that gender-responsive participation improves legitimacy, engagement access, and information flows. Yet, specialized units such as FETs remain underexamined at the strategic-operational interface. By grounding analysis in empirical operational contexts, this study contributes to bridging normative, functional, and diplomatic interpretations of gender-responsive peacekeeping capabilities.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding the strategic role of Female Engagement Teams (FET) in contemporary peacekeeping operations requires an analytical framework that transcends single-discipline explanations. Conventional peacekeeping literature often isolates gender integration within normative or representational discourses, while security studies frequently privilege kinetic capabilities. This study integrates three complementary theoretical pillars: defense diplomacy, human security, and gendered operational capability, supplemented by insights from non-kinetic influence theory.

1. Defense Diplomacy and Non-Kinetic Power

Defense diplomacy redefines military engagement beyond coercive instruments of state power. Traditionally associated with confidence-building, military cooperation, and strategic communication, defense diplomacy conceptualizes armed forces as agents of legitimacy, influence, and political signaling (Cottey & Forster,



2004). Rather than relying exclusively on deterrence or force projection, defense diplomacy emphasizes relational credibility, trust generation, and symbolic authority.

Within United Nations peacekeeping missions, military contingents operate within inherently diplomatic contexts. Their presence reflects international legitimacy, multilateral governance, and normative authority rather than unilateral power projection (Howard, 2019). Consequently, effectiveness depends not solely upon combat readiness but upon the capacity to cultivate cooperation, mitigate tensions, and reinforce mission legitimacy.

Non-kinetic influence theory complements this perspective. Contemporary conflicts increasingly demonstrate that strategic effects often emerge through persuasion, legitimacy, narrative control, and relational trust rather than direct force (Berdal & Ucko, 2015). In asymmetric environments, excessive reliance on kinetic measures may undermine legitimacy, generate resistance, or exacerbate insecurity (Autesserre, 2014).

From this vantage point, FETs represent instruments of non-kinetic influence embedded within military structures. Their operational function extends beyond tactical engagement toward legitimacy-building and trust-based influence — core mechanisms of defense diplomacy.

2. Human Security and Civilian-Centric Stabilization

Human security theory expands the referent object of security from states to individuals and communities (UNDP, 1994). This paradigm shift is particularly relevant to multidimensional peacekeeping mandates prioritizing Protection of Civilians (PoC), human rights, and stabilization. Contemporary threats — including gender-based violence, forced displacement, and social fragmentation — cannot be adequately addressed through conventional military deterrence alone (Kaldor, 2013).

Human security frameworks emphasize that insecurity is frequently socially embedded. Civilian vulnerability emerges not only from armed violence but from structural inequalities, identity-based tensions, and breakdowns in social trust (Shepherd, 2016). Stabilization therefore requires relational engagement, sociocultural sensitivity, and legitimacy-based security provision (Howard, 2019).

Gender occupies a central position within human security analysis. Conflict environments produce differentiated vulnerabilities, particularly for women and marginalized groups (Gizelis & Karim, 2020). Access to gender-segregated



populations, understanding localized grievances, and addressing conflict-related sexual violence become integral to security provision.

FET deployment directly aligns with human security logic. By facilitating culturally adaptive communication and engagement with vulnerable populations, FETs enhance situational awareness, trust-building, and civilian protection outcomes.

3. Gendered Operational Capability

Traditional military doctrine frequently conceptualizes capability in material or technological terms. However, contemporary operational environments increasingly privilege relational and sociocultural competencies (Berdal & Ucko, 2015). Gendered operational capability theory reframes gender integration as functional capacity rather than demographic diversity.

Karim and Beardsley (2017) argue that gender diversity enhances peacekeeping effectiveness through mechanisms of legitimacy, engagement access, and information acquisition. Female peacekeepers often possess distinct engagement pathways, particularly within culturally restrictive environments (Jennings, 2011). This capability expansion mitigates structural blind spots affecting intelligence, civilian protection, and stabilization.

FETs exemplify institutionalized gendered capability. Unlike individual participation models, FETs function as structured operational units designed to generate specific strategic effects:

- Expanding access to local populations
- Enhancing legitimacy and trust
- Facilitating relational intelligence
- Supporting conflict de-escalation

Importantly, these capabilities operate primarily within the non-kinetic domain. Their effectiveness derives from credibility, communication, and sociocultural proximity rather than coercive capacity.



4. Legitimacy, Trust, and Non-Kinetic Influence

Peacekeeping effectiveness literature increasingly identifies legitimacy as a decisive strategic variable (Howard, 2019). Legitimacy shapes civilian cooperation, information flows, and mission sustainability. Military presence perceived as culturally insensitive or coercive may generate resistance, reduce intelligence acquisition, and undermine stabilization efforts (Autesserre, 2014).

Trust functions as the operational currency of legitimacy. Relational trust facilitates civilian reporting, reduces tensions, and enhances early threat detection (Karim & Beardsley, 2017). Gender-responsive engagement mechanisms, including FET deployment, directly contribute to trust-building processes.

Non-kinetic influence theory further clarifies these dynamics. Influence in asymmetric conflicts often emerges through symbolic credibility, social acceptance, and narrative alignment rather than force dominance (Berdal & Ucko, 2015). FETs generate influence effects by reducing psychological barriers, enhancing communication channels, and reinforcing perceptions of impartiality.

5. Conceptual Synthesis: FET as Hybrid Strategic Instrument

Integrating these theoretical strands, this study conceptualizes Female Engagement Teams as hybrid strategic instruments operating at the intersection of security, legitimacy, and diplomacy.

FETs generate strategic effects through four interrelated mechanisms:

- a. Access Expansion Mechanism. Gender-responsive engagement enables interaction with populations inaccessible to conventional units.
- b. Legitimacy Amplification Mechanism. Gender integration signals sociocultural sensitivity, reinforcing mission credibility.
- c. Relational Intelligence Mechanism. Trust-mediated engagement enhances situational awareness and early threat detection.
- d. Non-Kinetic Influence Mechanism. Persuasive engagement reduces tensions and supports stabilization processes.

Within defense diplomacy logic, these mechanisms function as force multipliers. Military capability is amplified not through additional firepower but through enhanced legitimacy, trust, and social acceptance.

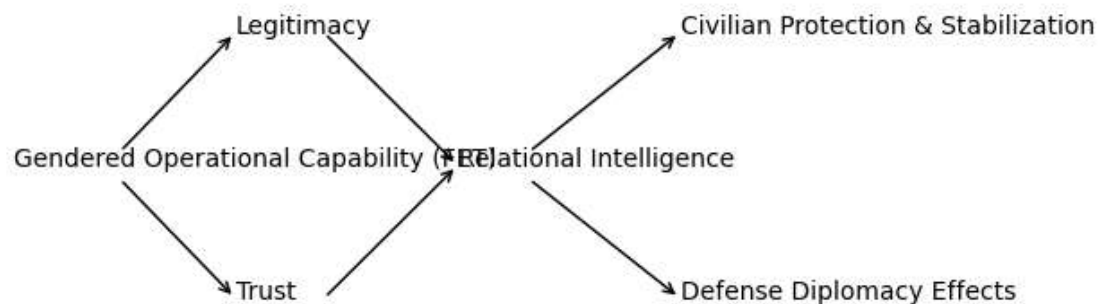
6. Theoretical Contribution and Novelty

This framework advances three key theoretical contributions:

First, it challenges normative-instrumental dichotomies by demonstrating that gender integration produces measurable strategic effects.

Second, it shifts analytical focus from individual participation metrics toward unit-level capability transformation.

Third, it integrates FET deployment into defense diplomacy theory, conceptualizing gender-responsive units as instruments of non-kinetic strategic influence.





Methodology

This study employs a qualitative-empirical research design grounded in the analysis of primary operational documentation. The dominant data source is the *Laporan Purna Tugas Satgas BGC TNI Konga XXXIX-C MONUSCO TA 2021–2022*, which constitutes an official post-deployment operational report. The selection of this document as the principal dataset reflects the study's objective to examine gender-responsive military capabilities through observed operational practices rather than purely normative or theoretical constructs.

Unlike conventional studies that rely primarily on policy texts or secondary statistical datasets, this research adopts a document-based empirical strategy. Operational reports represent a valuable yet underutilized source of field-based evidence, offering granular insights into mission dynamics, threat environments, unit functions, and engagement patterns. Such documents capture the lived operational realities of peacekeeping missions, thereby enabling analysis of strategic effects emerging from everyday practices.

The analytical framework draws upon multiple categories of operational data embedded within the report, including: (1) recorded operational activities, (2) descriptions of unit capabilities, (3) assessments of the security environment, (4) documented interactions with armed groups, and (5) gender-specific operational roles. These categories provide complementary perspectives necessary for understanding how Female Engagement Teams (FET) function within multidimensional peacekeeping contexts.

The methodological orientation of this study is interpretive-analytical rather than descriptive. The analysis does not treat the operational report merely as a narrative record but as empirical evidence reflecting patterns of strategic behavior, institutional capability deployment, and relational engagement mechanisms. By focusing on documented practices, the study identifies causal pathways linking gendered operational capability with legitimacy formation, trust-building processes, intelligence acquisition, and stabilization outcomes.

A key strength of this approach lies in its capacity to bridge micro-level operational dynamics with macro-level theoretical constructs. Contemporary peacekeeping effectiveness is increasingly understood as contingent upon relational legitimacy, sociocultural sensitivity, and non-kinetic influence mechanisms. Operational documentation provides empirical grounding for examining these mechanisms, particularly in environments characterized by asymmetric threats and civilian vulnerability.



To enhance analytical rigor, the study adopts a structured content analysis strategy. Relevant sections of the report were systematically examined to identify recurring operational themes, capability functions, and engagement patterns associated with FET deployment. This process enables the extraction of analytically significant constructs such as legitimacy effects, access expansion, relational intelligence, and conflict de-escalation mechanisms.

The research design acknowledges inherent limitations associated with document-based analysis. Operational reports may reflect institutional framing, selective emphasis, or doctrinal language. However, rather than treating these characteristics as biases requiring elimination, the study interprets them as part of the organizational logic through which military institutions construct operational meaning. Such framing is itself analytically relevant within defense diplomacy and legitimacy studies.

Overall, this methodological approach enables the study to conceptualize gender integration as an operational-strategic phenomenon. By grounding analysis in primary operational evidence, the research moves beyond abstract normative debates and contributes empirically informed insights into the strategic role of Female Engagement Teams in contemporary UN peacekeeping missions.

Findings and Discussion

1. FET as Operational Capability, Not Symbolic Inclusion

The operational documentation reveals that the Female Engagement Team (FET) was not positioned as an auxiliary or symbolic component within the Rapidly Deployable Battalion (RDB), but rather as an active functional element embedded within core mission activities. The post-deployment operational report explicitly records FET involvement in patrol operations, Observation Post (OP) deployment, Civil-Military Coordination (CIMIC), weapons training, communication exercises, child protection outreach, gender equality dissemination, and awareness programs addressing conflict-related sexual violence.

This breadth of activities demonstrates that FET personnel were structurally integrated into operational routines traditionally associated with conventional military roles. Their participation in patrol and OP deployment indicates direct engagement with field security dynamics, challenging assumptions that gender-responsive units operate primarily within soft or community-facing functions.



Similarly, inclusion in weapons and communication training reflects institutional recognition of FET as a capability-bearing unit rather than a representational entity.

Analytically, this finding underscores a critical shift in understanding gender integration within peacekeeping missions. Rather than constituting symbolic compliance with the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, gender integration in this context represents capability expansion. The FET functioned as an operational asset contributing to mission effectiveness through distinct engagement pathways, legitimacy effects, and relational competencies. This aligns with emerging scholarship emphasizing that gender diversity generates functional advantages, particularly in environments characterized by sociocultural complexity and civilian-centric mandates (Karim & Beardsley, 2017; Gizelis & Karim, 2020).

Importantly, the institutional framing of FET within operational documentation reflects a pragmatic orientation. Gender-responsive deployment is operationalized as a solution to engagement constraints rather than solely as normative obligation. Such framing illustrates the evolution of gender integration from equality discourse toward operational rationality.

2. Expanding Engagement Access in Fragile Societies

The Area of Responsibility (AoR) within MONUSCO presented deeply embedded sociocultural dynamics that shaped engagement possibilities. Interaction with local populations, particularly women and vulnerable groups, often encounters structural barriers rooted in cultural norms, social hierarchies, and conflict-induced distrust (Jennings, 2011). Conventional military units may face limitations in accessing gender-segregated populations, thereby constraining situational awareness and community engagement.

FET deployment mitigated these constraints by enabling culturally adaptive communication channels. Operational records indicate that FET personnel facilitated direct communication with women, expanded access to socially restricted information networks, reduced community distrust, and enhanced perceptions of legitimacy associated with military presence. These engagement functions are strategically consequential. In fragile security environments, information flows and civilian cooperation are mediated through relational trust rather than coercive authority (Autesserre, 2014).

The expansion of engagement access produced multiple strategic effects. First, it broadened the mission's social reach, allowing peacekeepers to interact with segments



of the population otherwise inaccessible. Second, it strengthened community trust, reducing psychological barriers associated with armed forces presence. Third, it enhanced legitimacy by signaling sociocultural sensitivity and inclusivity.

From a defense diplomacy perspective, these mechanisms align with influence models emphasizing credibility and legitimacy rather than force dominance (Cottey & Forster, 2004). Military effectiveness in peacekeeping contexts depends not solely upon deterrence capacity but upon the ability to cultivate cooperation and mitigate resistance. FET operations contributed directly to these legitimacy-building processes, illustrating how gender-responsive capabilities function as instruments of non-kinetic influence.

Moreover, this finding reinforces human security scholarship highlighting that security provision in asymmetric conflicts is socially embedded (Kaldor, 2013). Civilian perceptions, trust dynamics, and sociocultural legitimacy shape operational outcomes. FET deployment therefore constitutes an adaptive response to relational dimensions of insecurity.

3. Strategic Contribution to Civilian Protection

Protection of Civilians (PoC) remains a central mandate within MONUSCO. Contemporary PoC frameworks emphasize not only deterrence but also early threat identification, community cooperation, and contextual understanding of civilian vulnerabilities (United Nations, 2020). In asymmetric environments, threats frequently emerge through localized patterns of coercion, social tension, and gender-based violence rather than conventional battlefield engagements.

Operational evidence indicates that FET activities strengthened PoC implementation through CIMIC engagement, awareness programs addressing sexual violence, enhanced social situational awareness, and child protection initiatives. These functions directly intersect with civilian protection dynamics. Awareness campaigns addressing conflict-related sexual violence contribute to deterrence by signaling normative enforcement and institutional presence. Engagement with vulnerable populations improves situational awareness, enabling early identification of emerging risks.

A critical analytical insight emerges from this finding: civilian protection outcomes are partly mediated through legitimacy and trust. Military units perceived as culturally insensitive or socially distant may struggle to secure civilian cooperation,



thereby limiting PoC effectiveness (Howard, 2019). FET presence enhances legitimacy by fostering perceptions of inclusivity and sociocultural responsiveness.

Additionally, gender-responsive engagement addresses differentiated civilian vulnerabilities. Conflict environments generate distinct risks for women and marginalized groups, particularly regarding sexual violence and exclusion from security processes (Shepherd, 2016). FET deployment enhances the mission's capacity to address these vulnerabilities through targeted engagement.

Thus, FET contribution to PoC extends beyond facilitative interaction. It constitutes a strategic mechanism enhancing legitimacy, situational awareness, and trust-based cooperation – all critical variables in civilian-centric stabilization.

4. FET and Non-Kinetic Influence on Armed Groups

One of the most strategically significant operational outcomes involved the voluntary surrender of armed groups, including factions of Raia Mutomboki. Operational documentation highlights persuasive engagement strategies, dialogue with community leaders, CIMIC-based trust-building, and the involvement of FET personnel, particularly in handling female militia members.

Disengagement achieved through persuasion rather than coercion reflects non-kinetic strategic influence. Contemporary conflict studies emphasize that armed group behavior is often shaped by perceptions of legitimacy, safety, and engagement pathways rather than purely military deterrence (Berdal & Ucko, 2015). FET presence played a particularly decisive role when female combatants were involved, reducing psychological barriers and enhancing perceptions of safety.

This finding underscores the strategic significance of gender-responsive capability within conflict de-escalation processes. Conventional units may encounter relational limitations when engaging female combatants or addressing gender-sensitive issues. FET deployment mitigates such constraints, facilitating dialogue and trust-building.

From a defense diplomacy lens, these outcomes illustrate micro-level influence mechanisms embedded within military operations. Persuasive engagement enhances mission legitimacy while contributing to stabilization objectives. The strategic effect emerges not through force dominance but through relational credibility and sociocultural sensitivity.



5. Intelligence and Social Information Flows

Operational capability descriptions emphasize information collection and analysis as critical mission functions. In asymmetric security environments, intelligence acquisition increasingly depends upon community engagement and trust-mediated information flows (Karim & Beardsley, 2017).

FET presence indirectly enhanced community-derived intelligence, identification of informal threat indicators, and civilian reporting willingness. These intelligence pathways differ qualitatively from technical surveillance mechanisms. Relational intelligence relies upon trust, legitimacy, and social proximity.

Gender-responsive engagement expands access to localized knowledge networks, particularly within gender-segregated societies (Gizelis & Karim, 2020). Civilian populations may exhibit greater willingness to share information with personnel perceived as approachable and culturally sensitive. FET deployment thus functions as an intelligence multiplier by strengthening relational trust.

Analytically, this finding reinforces arguments that contemporary military effectiveness increasingly depends upon sociocultural competencies rather than material superiority alone (Berdal & Ucko, 2015).

6. Gender as Strategic Multiplier

The empirical evidence collectively suggests that gender-responsive units generate legitimacy effects, trust-building advantages, expanded communication networks, conflict de-escalation capacity, and reintegration facilitation. These outcomes align directly with defense diplomacy logic emphasizing influence through credibility, proximity, and social acceptance.

Gender integration therefore emerges as a strategic multiplier. Rather than augmenting kinetic capacity, it enhances legitimacy-based influence mechanisms critical in asymmetric environments.

Theoretical Implications

This study challenges conventional interpretations that frame gender integration primarily within normative equality paradigms. The findings support the argument that gender integration constitutes strategic operational capability. FETs function as



instruments of non-kinetic influence, legitimacy multipliers, social intelligence facilitators, and micro-level defense diplomacy actors.

Practical Implications for Defense Diplomacy

For troop-contributing countries, FET deployment produces dual strategic benefits. Externally, it strengthens mission legitimacy, enhances civilian engagement, and improves stabilization outcomes. Internally, it projects professional military identity, reinforces soft power, and demonstrates adaptive capability.

Conclusion

The transformation of contemporary peacekeeping environments demands analytical frameworks capable of capturing the multidimensional nature of security provision. Modern United Nations (UN) missions operate within contexts defined by asymmetric threats, fragmented authority, and socially embedded insecurity. Under such conditions, military effectiveness cannot be reduced to kinetic capability alone. Instead, legitimacy, trust, relational engagement, and sociocultural adaptability emerge as decisive determinants of mission success.

This study advances the argument that Female Engagement Teams (FET) represent a strategically consequential capability within contemporary peacekeeping operations. Grounded in empirical operational documentation from Indonesia's Rapidly Deployable Battalion (RDB), Satgas BGC TNI Konga XXXIX-C MONUSCO, the findings challenge conventional interpretations that position gender integration primarily within normative or representational paradigms. Rather than functioning as symbolic instruments of equality compliance, FETs demonstrate measurable operational and strategic relevance.

The analysis reveals that FET deployment produces disproportionate strategic effects through multiple interrelated mechanisms. First, FETs expand engagement access by enabling culturally adaptive communication channels, thereby mitigating structural barriers inherent in socioculturally sensitive environments. Second, FET presence amplifies mission legitimacy by reinforcing perceptions of inclusivity, responsiveness, and sociocultural sensitivity. Third, legitimacy formation strengthens relational trust, which in turn enhances community cooperation and intelligence acquisition. Fourth, trust-mediated engagement facilitates non-kinetic influence mechanisms critical for conflict de-escalation, civilian protection, and armed group disengagement processes.



These findings carry significant theoretical implications. The study contributes to bridging persistent conceptual divides between normative gender integration discourses and operational effectiveness literature. Empirical evidence increasingly suggests that these domains are not contradictory but mutually reinforcing. Gender-responsive capabilities enhance legitimacy, and legitimacy functions as a force multiplier within asymmetric stabilization environments. By conceptualizing FETs as hybrid strategic instruments, this study reframes gender integration as operational rationality aligned with contemporary security demands.

Furthermore, the research extends defense diplomacy theory by incorporating gender-responsive military capabilities into its analytical scope. Defense diplomacy traditionally emphasizes legitimacy-based influence, relational credibility, and non-coercive mechanisms of strategic engagement. FET deployment exemplifies these mechanisms at the micro-operational level. The strategic effects generated by FETs — including trust-building, relational intelligence, and persuasion-based influence — align directly with defense diplomacy logic, suggesting that gendered capabilities constitute an under-recognized dimension of contemporary military power.

From a practical perspective, the findings underscore the necessity of reconceptualizing gender integration within military doctrine and peacekeeping strategies. Gender-responsive units should not be treated solely as instruments of representational diversity but as capability-bearing assets contributing to mission effectiveness. Institutionalizing FET functions within operational planning frameworks may enhance legitimacy formation, situational awareness, and non-kinetic influence capacity — variables increasingly central to peacekeeping success.

For troop-contributing countries, FET deployment generates dual strategic benefits. Externally, it strengthens mission credibility, civilian cooperation, and stabilization outcomes. Internally, it contributes to the projection of professional military identity, adaptive capability, and soft power legitimacy. In an era where international influence is frequently mediated through perceptions of responsibility, inclusivity, and professionalism, gender-responsive capabilities acquire broader diplomatic significance.

Ultimately, this study affirms that contemporary peacekeeping effectiveness is inseparable from legitimacy dynamics. In asymmetric and socially fragmented environments, the strategic utility of military forces increasingly resides in their capacity to generate trust, credibility, and relational influence. Female Engagement Teams embody this transformation, illustrating how gender integration operates not merely as normative compliance but as a strategic-operational necessity.



Future research should further investigate the causal mechanisms identified in this study through comparative cross-mission analyses and mixed-method approaches. Empirical examination of legitimacy effects, relational intelligence dynamics, and non-kinetic influence pathways may refine theoretical understanding of gendered military capabilities. Expanding the analytical integration between gender studies, security theory, and defense diplomacy will be essential for capturing the evolving logic of contemporary peacekeeping operations.

Novelty Statement

This study offers a distinctive contribution by reconceptualizing Female Engagement Teams (FET) beyond prevailing normative and representational frameworks, positioning them as strategic-operational capabilities within contemporary UN peacekeeping missions. While existing scholarship predominantly examines gender integration through equality metrics, descriptive participation data, or aggregated gender diversity effects, this research advances a capability-centered analytical perspective grounded in primary operational documentation. By empirically demonstrating how FET deployment generates legitimacy effects, expands engagement access, enhances relational intelligence pathways, and produces non-kinetic influence outcomes, the study bridges a critical gap between gender studies, peacekeeping effectiveness, and defense diplomacy theory. Furthermore, the article introduces an integrative theoretical framework that conceptualizes FETs as hybrid instruments of defense diplomacy, thereby extending defense diplomacy literature to incorporate gender-responsive military capabilities—an area largely under-theorized in contemporary security studies. This capability-oriented, empirically anchored approach provides a novel explanatory lens for understanding how gender integration functions as operational rationality rather than symbolic compliance, particularly within asymmetric and socially fragmented conflict environments.



References

- Autesserre, S. (2014). *Peaceland: Conflict resolution and the everyday politics of international intervention*. Cambridge University Press.
- Berdal, M., & Ucko, D. H. (2015). *The new counterinsurgency era: Transforming the U.S. military for modern wars*. Georgetown University Press.
- Cottey, A., & Forster, A. (2004). *Reshaping defence diplomacy: New roles for military cooperation and assistance*. Oxford University Press for the International Institute for Strategic Studies.
- Dharmapuri, S. (2013). Not just a numbers game: Increasing women's participation in UN peacekeeping. *International Peacekeeping*, 20(1), 58–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2012.761843>
- Gizelis, T.-I., & Karim, S. (2020). Gender equality and peacekeeping outcomes. *Journal of Peace Research*, 57(2), 224–233. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343319896552>
- Howard, L. M. (2019). *Power in peacekeeping*. Cambridge University Press.
- Jennings, K. M. (2011). Women's participation in UN peacekeeping operations: Agents of change or stranded symbols? *NOREF Report*. Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre.
- Kaldor, M. (2013). *New and old wars: Organized violence in a global era* (3rd ed.). Stanford University Press.
- Karim, S. (2020). Women and peacekeeping. In T. D. Sisk & A. Jarstad (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of peacebuilding, statebuilding, and peace formation*. Oxford University Press.
- Karim, S., & Beardsley, K. (2016). Explaining sexual exploitation and abuse in peacekeeping missions: The role of female peacekeepers and gender equality in contributing countries. *Journal of Peace Research*, 53(1), 100–115. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343315615506>
- Karim, S., & Beardsley, K. (2017). Equal opportunity peacekeeping: Women, peace, and security in post-conflict states. *Oxford University Press*.
- Kirby, P., & Shepherd, L. J. (2016). The futures past of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. *International Affairs*, 92(2), 373–392. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12549>
- Olsson, L., & Tryggestad, T. L. (2001). *Women and international peacekeeping*. Frank Cass.



- Shepherd, L. J. (2016). Making war safe for women? National action plans and the militarisation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. *International Political Science Review*, 37(3), 324–335. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512116629820>
- Tickner, J. A. (1992). *Gender in international relations: Feminist perspectives on achieving global security*. Columbia University Press.
- United Nations. (2020). *United Nations peacekeeping operations: Principles and guidelines (Capstone Doctrine)*. United Nations Department of Peace Operations.
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (1994). *Human Development Report 1994: New dimensions of human security*. Oxford University Press.
- United Nations Security Council. (2000). *Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security*. United Nations.
- Whitworth, S. (2004). *Men, militarism, and UN peacekeeping: A gendered analysis*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.