



# MONGOLIAN WOMEN PEACEKEEPERS



## MONGOLIAN GEOPOLITICS #17

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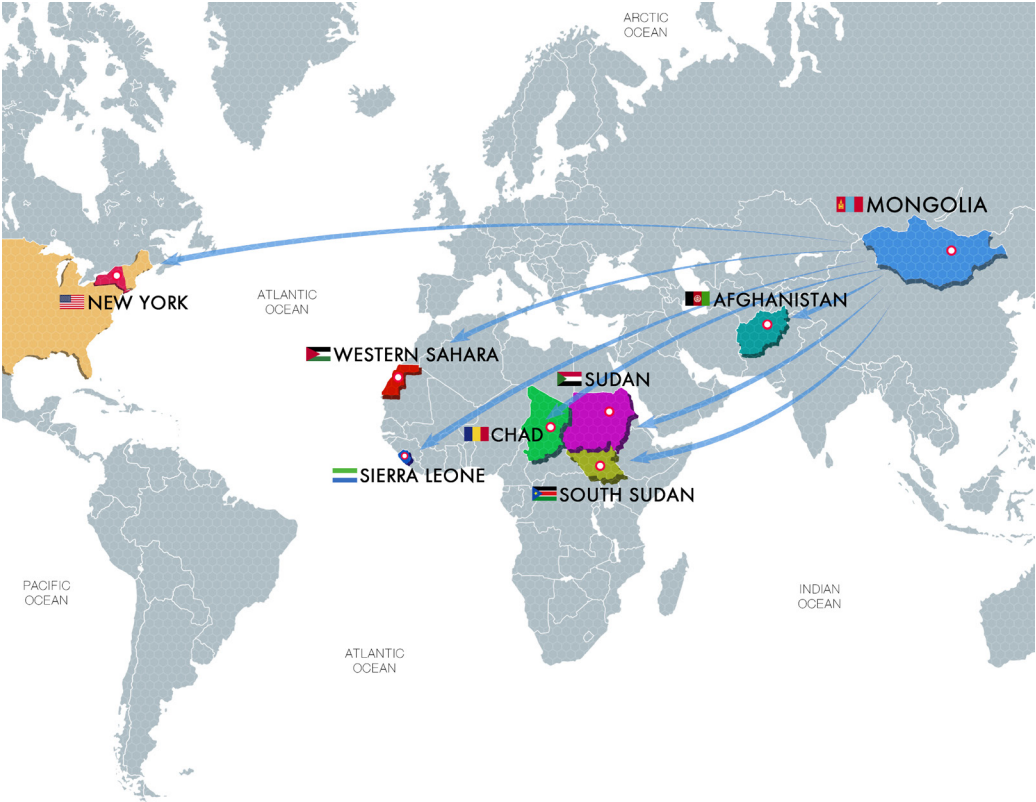
Layout: Yo.Batbold  
Cover illustration: I.Tuguldur

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ISBN 978-9919-9870-6-0

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In September 2021, Mongolian President Khurelsukh Ukhnaa pledged to the United Nations General Assembly to increase the percentage of Mongolian woman peacekeepers by 15 per cent, in alignment with UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security (2000). In addition, the President, who is the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, announced that Mongolia will host an international conference in Ulaanbaatar on the participation of female peacekeepers.<sup>1</sup> Then, in December, at the 2021 Seoul UN Peacekeeping Ministerial Meeting, Mongolian Defence Minister Saikhanbayar Gursed encouraged his counterparts to send delegates to the above-mentioned conference in June of this year.<sup>2</sup>

On Mongolian Military Day (18 March), the President bestowed the rank of Brigadier General to then-Colonel Bolor Ganbold, making her the first female general in the country's military history. Bolor was among the first female cohorts at the Mongolian Defence University in 1994 and was one of the first female peacekeepers serving in a field mission in Africa and in the UN headquarters in New York. Even though the news of the first female general made popular headlines, for many female soldiers, her promotion had been long overdue. For many women in the military and other uniformed services in Mongolia, gender equality has been neglected.

A strategy and policy guidance for supporting women personnel in the Mongolian armed forces and in the UN peacekeeping operations is sorely lacking. This paper describes the Mongolian women peacekeeping deployments and the commentary and recommendations from two expert workshops and a survey of women uniformed personnel. In concluding, the authors also recommend the establishment of a mobile training team of women soldiers to inspire other female personnel and to

work towards changing men's attitudes in the military and strengthening feminist foreign policy.

### OVERVIEW OF MONGOLIAN WOMEN PEACEKEEPING DEPLOYMENTS

The deployment of Mongolian female personnel to peacekeeping missions is recent and has grown significantly even in the not-so-woman-friendly male-dominated military culture. In the 1960s and 1970s, when Mongolia was a heavily militarized nation, uniformed women served only in the military hospitals, logistics and administration. None of these women were permitted to be trained or serve in the front-line specialties or leadership posts. Things began to change in 1994, when the Defence University recruited the first female cadets and, that same year, the Non-Commissioned Officer [NCO] Academy accepted its first batch of female cadets. The peacekeeping-designated special battalion (known as the Elite Battalion), which was established in 1997, employed the first female graduates from the Defence University and the NCO Academy.

Although these female personnel attended all types of training events and tactical exercises in the country, they were, again, not permitted to join in any multinational peacekeeping exercise until a Multinational Platoon Training Event in Bangladesh in 2002, when Mongolia was encouraged by the organizers to send female personnel. Similarly, the foreign military training programmes, including military observers and staff officers, were not open to Mongolian female military personnel until 2005, when the United States welcomed to send female officers and non-commissioned officers. By that time, only a few female personnel were allowed to attend language instructor courses and/or medical exchanges in the United States. Even the advanced professional military training and education

programmes, such as the command staff-level courses in western countries, were not open to female officers until 2011. The first female officers were sent to UN military observer courses abroad only after the funding government imposed the conditionality or preference for female personnel. The US International Military Training and Education Programme also encouraged Mongolia to send female personnel to its officer and non-commissioned officer courses. As a result, in 2006, four years after Mongolia sent its first male military observers, the first female Mongolian military observer slot was filled, in the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara.

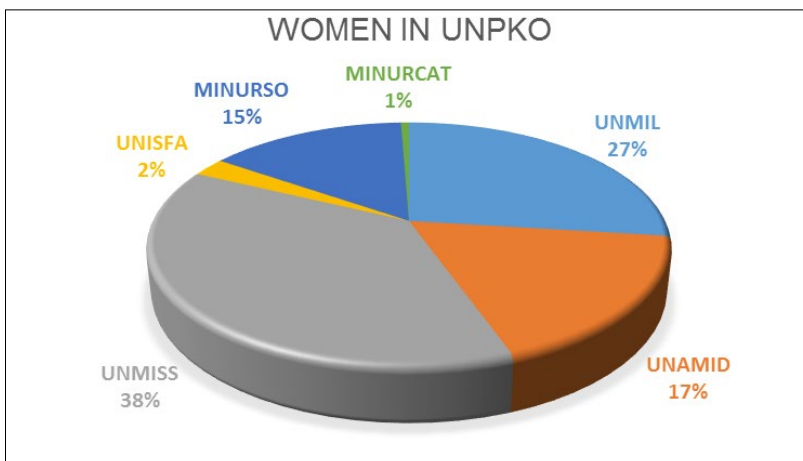
In 2008, the Mongolian Armed Forces took a significant step to implement the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and deployed its foremost female peacekeepers within the military contingent to the UN Mission in Liberia.<sup>3</sup> From 2008 to 2010, 44 female personnel were deployed to Liberia for that peacekeeping mission, although mostly in administration, kitchen and medical teams, however.<sup>4</sup> The deployment of female personnel was increased in 2010, when Mongolia deployed a Level II Field Medical Hospital to Darfur as part of the United Nations–African Union operations. Due to the nature of the deployment as medical, nearly 50 per cent of the personnel, or a total of 243 doctors and nurses in seven rotations, were women.<sup>5</sup> In 2015, proving female members' capability to operate at commanding posts in a highly risky environment, the first-ever female Contingent Commander was deployed to Darfur.

From 2011, participation of female personnel increased dramatically as Mongolia deployed its peacekeeping battalion to the United Nations Mission in South Sudan. As of March 2022, 513 women had served in South Sudan; 7 per cent of the current battalion personnel in the country is female.

In addition to the UN peacekeeping deployments, Mongolian women have been deployed within the Mongolian company to the NATO-led Resolute Support operation in Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> This was only due to a request from the German government for Mongolian female soldiers to learn from German counterparts while dealing with Afghan women and children (who cannot openly engage with men who do not belong to their household easily).

Mongolia's individualized deployments, such as military observers and staff officers, have increased significantly in the field and at the UN headquarters in New York, including for women.<sup>7</sup> Mongolian female observers, staff officers and contingent members have now served in field missions in Western Sahara, Chad, Sierra Leone, Sudan, South Sudan and Afghanistan (figure 1). Although the number of women deployed has increased, there has been a slight decrease since 2014 (figure 2).

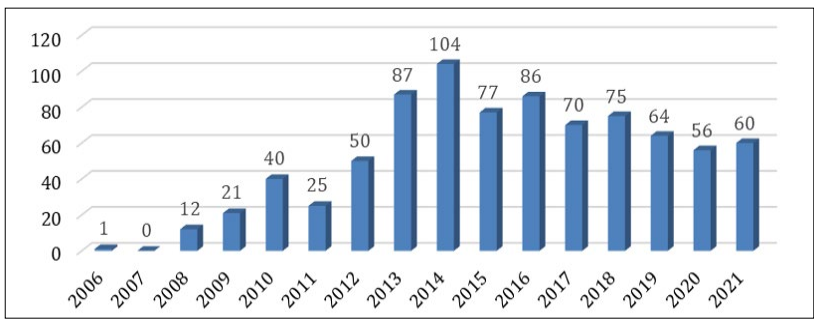
*Figure 1. Mongolian women's participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations*



Source: Department for Peace Operations of the General Staff of the Mongolian Armed Forces, March 2022.

Note: UNPKO= United Nations Peacekeeping Operations; MINURCAT= United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic and Chad; UNMIL= United Nations Mission in Liberia; UNAMID= African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur; UNMISS= United Nations Mission in South Sudan; UNISFA= United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei; and MINURSO= United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara.

Figure 2. Number of Mongolian women peacekeepers, 2006–2021



Note: Total women deployed as of end 2021 is 828. More are currently serving in Africa.

Source: Department for Peace Operations of the General Staff of the Mongolian Armed Forces, March 2022.

Although it appears to be that opportunities for female deployments have increased within the past 15 years, it was not the result of a national strategy following the Women, Peace and Security initiatives or a service-specific strategy or planning. Basically, two factors had a supporting role: The United Nations requested the deployment of female personnel



and the self-encouragement and competitiveness of female Mongolian personnel pushed them to learn and compete for peacekeeping slots and to demonstrate their ability and skills to fulfil the peacekeeping tasks. Still, even for a female-dominated contingent like the field hospital, the Mongolian authorities remain reluctant to appoint female officers in charge of a mission. Women deployed with a contingent are mostly tasked to carry out administrative, logistics or support roles, which could be rationalized for two reasons: (i) concern for the safety of female personnel in hostile zones and/or (ii) a mistrust or lack of training of female personnel for front-line duties.

## OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

With the aim of initiating Women, Peace and Security research, the authors of this paper organized two small but closely integrated workshops along with an opinion survey of female personnel who have served or are currently serving in a peacekeeping mission.

The first workshop, on the Participation of Women in Peacekeeping Operations (18 November 2021), was sponsored by the Office of the President and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation of Germany. The female peacekeepers shared their experiences and insights from a total of five peacekeeping deployments: individualized deployments (military observer and staff officer), infantry company to the UN Mission in Sierra Leone, infantry battalion to the UN Mission in South Sudan, Level II Hospital in a joint African Union and UN Mission in Darfur and the coalition mission, Resolute Support, with Germany in Afghanistan. Another objective was to provide an opportunity for women from the civilian police and border troops to share their experiences of being deployed to the UN civilian

police and peacekeeping missions. The final objective was to discuss overall and mission-specific challenges for the deployment of women with policy-level experts in the military as well as other uniformed services, including the border troops, internal troops, emergency troops, marshal services and the police.

The second workshop, Lessons Learned of Women Peacekeepers (14 March 2022), was again initiated by women peacekeepers and sponsored by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Unlike the previous event, this workshop brought together a diverse group of experts, including retired women peacekeepers, male officers and non-commissioned officers and personnel from the uniformed services, including the police and border troops. The participants were divided into several discussion groups to identify, categorize and prioritize challenges for women participating in peacekeeping missions and to forge practical policy recommendations to overcome the cultural, institutional and individual barriers to greater female inclusion.

All participants in both workshops also responded to the voluntary, anonymous opinion survey, which asked three questions: (i) What are the opportunities for women in peacekeeping? (ii) What types of challenges do women personnel encounter? (iii) What practical solutions can overcome these challenges? In addition, a test opinion survey was distributed among women peacekeepers who had served or are serving in a UN mission. Due to the timing and financial constraint, the opinion surveys did not reach a sufficient level of survey sample. However, the following findings stem from the limited survey responses, expert-level discussions conducted in the two workshops, involving a total of 50 participants. What appears here should encourage further policy research that will thus compel

the political and military leaders to make sustainable and meaningful commitment to the international objectives on women, peace and security required through the landmark Security Council Resolution 1325 that emphasizes the importance of women's full and equal participation in conflict resolution, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction.

### *Opportunities*

Peacekeeping missions provide multiple opportunities for female uniformed personnel. The women participants cited policy initiatives at the United Nations and other international organizations (such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) to include more female than male personnel for a range of deployments, from the individualized to contingent deployments and from the field to UN headquarters. The increased deployment opportunities have had positive and lasting consequences for Mongolia, its uniformed services, and its personnel (individually). In seizing more of these opportunities, the country will strengthen the delivery of equal rights (gender) and fulfil the country's responsibility to take the international gender equality initiatives seriously.

For the uniformed services, many participants argued that the peacekeeping deployment opportunities enable female military personnel to improve their professionalism by serving in the real-world scenarios and in a multinational setting. Most participants explained how these peacekeeping opportunities empower women soldiers and contribute to their professional development

## *Challenges*

Challenges for women peacekeepers fall into two large categories: one concerns cultural or overall institutional challenges and the other relates to deployment stages (pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment).

The participants agreed on three major challenges in the first category. First, the military human resource policy towards female personnel is unclear. Although there are no gender-based restrictions in the laws, resolutions or regulations, female personnel are often excluded from military jobs because of their sex. Second, there are no specific policies on education and training of female military personnel. Again, in the absence of formal restrictions, it is difficult for women to enrol in a language course (English or French) or in the professional military education programmes in Mongolia and abroad. One participant explained that the recently imposed requisite (of being deployed in a mission at least once) for enrolment in the English language courses automatically closes any opportunity for women longing to be deployed. Third, mid- and senior-level leadership posts remain closed for women soldiers. Because women are not represented at the senior leadership level, many female participants in the workshop argued that their interests are not considered in the male-dominated decision-making processes.

These three challenges are closely related and were also articulated by the participants during the second workshop. The overall institutional setting strengthens the male-dominated culture, in which men are reluctant to introduce or initiate human resource policies that encourage expanded roles for women in the military. In addition, several participants highlighted communication and cultural challenges for male leaders and

personnel when dealing with their female counterparts how to treat women as professionally equals. In the absence of awareness training or ethical guidelines, male leaders and personnel lack the skills to work with female personnel.

The deployment-related challenges relate to specific stages of a peacekeeping mission. In the selection stage, because the peacekeeping slots are limited, many women use informal networks to be selected. This makes the merit-based selection process ineffective and marginalizes those women who follow the formal procedure. At the pre-deployment stage, participants highlighted how the military leaders increase the training load for women personnel, most likely to encourage the selected women to voluntarily drop out and thus reduce or eliminate the female personnel for deployment. This discrimination causes unnecessary stress individually as well as collectively for female personnel.

The overall pre-deployment training package does not meet the field requirements and does not include some necessary training elements (such as orientation on the religions and culture of the host nation or tailored training for those fulfilling medical or law enforcement duties).

The long list of challenges that emerged through the survey and workshops was topped by the lack of psychological support (such as counselling). Military commanders will insult and belittle all personnel for any wrongdoing or mistakes, even without proper investigation first. In addition to weather, terrain and mission-specific stress factors, this type of unprofessional attitude and actions of military leaders automatically increases the stress, especially for female personnel. Logistical support is another big challenge. Because the barracks and washrooms in the

area of operation do not properly follow the military rules, regulations and standards, hygiene and comfort are reduced. The military leaders or senior officers treat female personnel discriminately, with little respect, as if they are trying to discourage female personnel to participate in the peacekeeping mission.

Although many participants were reluctant to discuss the issue of sexual harassment at all stages of deployment, it was quite clear the issue needs to be investigated. The military does not have clear-cut rules and regulations on sexual harassment, nor is there any proper training provided to commanding officers and personnel on how to deal with this issue.

The other challenge at the deployment stage is communication with family members. Due to security concerns (information protection concern), female and male personnel cannot maintain regular communication with their family and loved ones. This certainly causes challenges for married women and unnecessary stress.

In the post-deployment stage, participants complained about the quality of the medical care and support. In general, participants criticized the absence of lessons learned activities. Action reviews or lessons learned by a contingent are discussed only at the leadership level, which restricts opportunities for individuals to collectively share their mistakes or learn what to improve on. Experience-based assessments among the peacekeepers are not carried out effectively; hence, follow-up actions are lacking to fill any gaps.

### *Solutions*

The participants recommended several solutions with varying degrees of practicality and/or priority. Many participants suggested developing a military human resource policy that facilitates the participation of female personnel in peacekeeping missions in more substantive ways than a ceremonial or showcase manner. Such a human resource policy needs to align with objectives of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on gender mainstreaming and be reflected in the national strategies, programmes and plans for armed forces development.

The second priority cited is education advancement and training for female personnel. To increase the quality of professionalism and representation at the leadership level, it is necessary to have a comprehensive educational and training programme, starting at the NCO Academy and the Defence University (bachelor's degrees) and moving into professional military development (specialized and advanced courses) programmes. Leadership and mid-level positions should be openly declared as competitive, merit-based and gender-inclusive positions.

The third priority solution is to change the current policy documents, such as rules, regulations and standards regarding the selection, pre-deployment training, deployment and post-deployment processes. The policies regulating these matters are outdated and vague. Revised or new policy guidelines to improve the selection process, to reform the pre-deployment training programmes, to improve the military organization and service at the deployment stage and to introduce a psychological support system post-mission on rehabilitation and welfare aspects are all needed.

The fourth highlighted solution is to update the Mongolian military rules and regulations in conformity with the UN and other international standards.

The last two points from the participants refer to a revision of the military ethical regulation and to draft policy guidelines regarding the health of women military personnel, especially those deployed in peacekeeping missions.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The Mongolian President's call for increased female participation in UN peacekeeping missions is a timely, practical, and important foreign policy objective. Over the past five years since the United Nations put forward an initiative to increase the participation of women peacekeepers to better protect women and children from violence, Mongolia has made a significant contribution in sending more than 800 female personnel for the UN and coalition missions. Mongolia's commitment is timely because it fulfils its responsibility as a UN Member State. It is practical because the country has already made substantive contributions and, as a small State, Mongolia seeks all possible ways to strengthen its multilateral policy amid the geopolitical tension of great powers. Rather than taking sides with one of the rival great powers, Mongolia seeks ways to strengthen its ties with the international community. Therefore, it should strive to increase its visibility and contributions. Empowering women and increasing gender equality now sets Mongolia apart from countries in the East and Central Asian neighbourhoods. A more women-equal foreign policy would likely improve Mongolia's relations with developed democracies in Asia, Europe and North America. Many of these countries regard Mongolia as a like-



mindful State when it comes to issues for women and children. Such a women-equal foreign policy would strengthen Mongolia's democratic identity and strengthen ties with many of its third neighbours and beyond.

In addition to the many good ideas that emerged through the workshops and survey, the authors suggest the establishment of a mobile training team. It should consist of women peacekeepers (inclusive of retired officers) who share their experiences with commanders and other male personnel to change their mindsets and with female personnel to inspire them (such as coaching). The mobile training team would work with military units as well as units and personnel of the other uniformed services, such as the police, border troops, internal troops, and emergency troops. If this idea is workable and helpful for Mongolia, the mobile training team also could work beyond Mongolia, such as with emerging troop and police personnel contributing countries.

## Endnotes

- 1 Unurzul.M, President of Mongolia addresses the General Debate of the General Assembly, *Montsame*, 23 September, 2021, [www.montsame.mn/en/read/275980](http://www.montsame.mn/en/read/275980).
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- 5 Nyamsuren Chultem, and Mendee Jargalsaikhan, *Small-power Diplomacy: Mongolia's Peacekeeping Commitment*, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/mongolei/18254.pdf>
- 6 Peace support operations department, General Staff of the Mongolian Armed Forces, 26 March 2022.
- 7 Ibid.

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is the oldest political foundation in Germany. The foundation is named after Friedrich Ebert, the first democratically elected president of Germany.

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