



THE SYSTEMIC GAME CHANGER

Why NATO Advocates Gender Responsive Leadership

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The integration of gender perspective is a force multiplier and a way to safeguard the common value base of our societies such as individual liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, in our organizations, missions, operations and activities.

TIME TO TAKE STOCK: 2025 marks the 25th anniversary of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, the mother resolution of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. What is still needed to reach the full transformative potential of the WPS resolutions? NATO has stated that gender-responsive leadership is essential to ensure this transformation and honour the agreements made. Now, a generation after the resolution passed, there is still a lot of work to do.

True to NATO's values and the research-based knowledge of how gender perspective enhances mission effectiveness, NATO introduced its new NATO Policy on Women, Peace and Security,¹ followed by the Military Guidance for the Integration of the NATO Policy on Women, Peace and Security in military missions, operations and activities² in late 2024. The integration of gender perspective and execution of gender

analysis³ and gender mainstreaming were stated as important tools to achieve mission success. While this remains true, NATO has introduced a stronger emphasis on gender-responsive leadership to ensure accountability, and effective and timely progress.

How does gender-responsive leadership differ from regular leadership? First, to perform gender responsive leadership, one needs gender awareness. This means that leaders must be aware of why gender perspective is important. This in turn requires knowledge about gender as a fundamental organizing principle in all societies and how it affects humanities, cultures, organizations and individuals' opportunities and challenges. Consequently, one needs gendered knowledge about society in any area of military operations, and about one's own organization. More specifically, one needs sex- and age-disaggregated data (SADD) to perform gender analysis. A leader in a military context needs knowledge about how their



"In today's dynamic and ever-evolving security landscape, the integration of gender perspectives within military operations is no longer a choice but strategic imperative."

— **Jean-Pierre Lacroix,**
Under-Secretary General for Peace Operations
United Nations

<https://www.un.org/en/peace-and-security/three-takeaways-women-defence>



Gender-responsive leaders understand the culture of their organization, and ensure that they will take a transformative approach to the needed organizational changes and create the psychological safety required to integrate a gender perspective.





The WPS Agenda is meant to benefit societies as a whole, not only women and definitely not at the expense of men. The photo shows participants of a Key Leader Seminar at NCGM, June 2025, photo courtesy of NCGM

leaders never received education and training on the subject and related areas of change, and need added competence to ensure they are gender responsive in their leadership.

The Nordic Centre for Gender in Military Operations (NCGM) offers NATO-approved key leader seminars for the OF-6 to OF-9 levels and commanding officer seminars for the OF-5 level on the topic, in addition to tailored senior leader seminars to ensure continuing education for those aiming to gain gender perspective in military operations. These efforts can support individuals in becoming gender-responsive leaders who understand the culture of their organization, and ensure that they will take a transformative approach to the needed organizational changes and create the psychological safety required to integrate a gender perspective.

Since the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000, states as well as organizations such as NATO, UN and EU have worked on implementing the resolutions

through the integration of gender perspective in military domains. During the Washington Summit in June 2024, NATO endorsed its revised women, peace and security policy, in which gender-responsive leadership and accountability is one of four strategic objectives. These will guide NATO's political and military efforts to "ensure NATO leaders strengthen their gender expertise, work towards gender equality and are accountable for the implementation of the WPS Agenda." While recognizing the need for gender-responsive leadership is important, it is far from enough. Effort is needed to implement the policy and reach the strategic objectives.

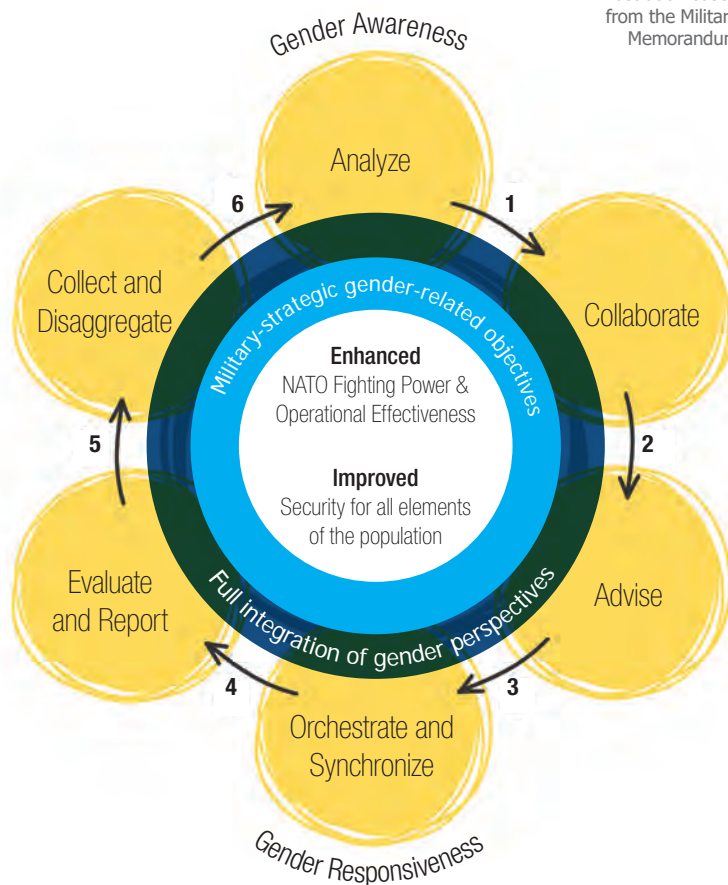
The integration of gender perspective is a force multiplier and a way to safeguard the common value base of our societies such as individual liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, in our organizations, missions, operations and activities. As the role of the UN Security Council is to maintain international peace and security, the resolutions on WPS are

own organization is gendered and how war, crisis and conflict affect and are affected differently by women, men, boys and girls. Additionally, they need to know the policies and guidelines that govern their organization. And there is another layer: all of the above are subject to change over time and therefore need continuous attention. In sum, gender awareness should be the basis of a leader's analysis, response and actions.

For some leaders, this is naturally incorporated in their leadership and part of their everyday routines, but for many seasoned leaders this has not been part of their education and training. In many military cultures, gender perspectives have not been a priority. On the contrary, a sometimes hypermasculine organizational culture has prevented integration of gender perspective due to lack of status and knowledge, or an unwillingness or inability to change; some military cultures have even subjected gender issues to ridicule or felt their status threatened by it.⁴ This is why gender-responsive leadership needs particular attention in a military context.

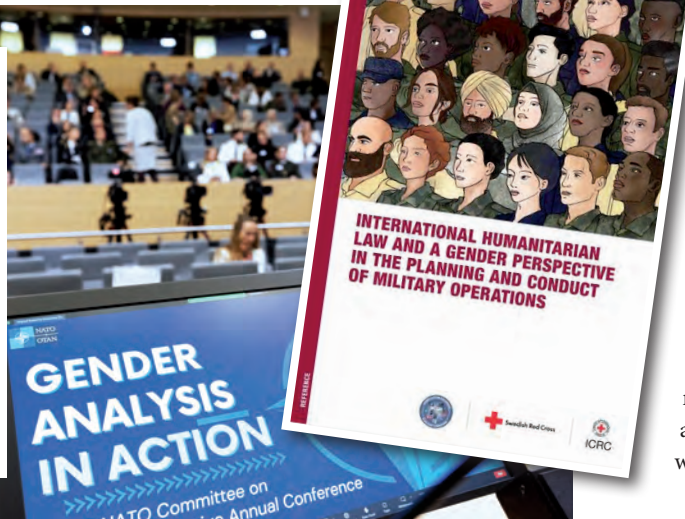
Many countries are building their capabilities in this area from the bottom up, through education and training for new soldiers and staff. This means that many of today's

Illustration based on a figure from the Military Committee Memorandum 0197-2024



While the need to conduct gender analyses in military contexts may seem like a novel idea, it is not. 25 years ago, the UN Security Council expressed the need and desire to integrate gender perspective into military operations. UN Security Council Resolution 1325, unanimously adopted on 31 October 2000, was the first of ten resolutions on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) adopted by the Council.

Photo by NATO



take as much time as leadership allows it to. Accountability is key and is addressed specifically in the new NATO Policy on the Implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. As instruments of NATO's policies, leaders at all levels should set high standards when it comes to the integration of gender perspectives. As the former Australian Chief of Army, retired Lieutenant General David Morrison, stated in his widely hailed speech against misogyny: "The standard you walk past is the standard you accept!"¹⁶ †

significant in recognizing the interlinkages between conflict and gender inequality.

The WPS agenda is firmly rooted in international law and policy frameworks, and calls upon states to fulfil their international obligations under international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law. IHL is of particular relevance here, being the body of law that aims to limit the effects of armed conflict. IHL protects persons who are not, or are no longer, directly or actively participating in hostilities, and imposes limits on the means and methods of warfare.

As gender inequality prevails worldwide and is exacerbated in theatres of combat, IHL must be applied with a gender perspective. As mentioned, armed conflict affects women, men, girls and boys differently. Civilians may experience different harm during armed conflict due to their sex or gender. Moreover, women are often "invisible" in operational data, resulting in gendered data gaps.

Additionally, who is applying the law may affect how the law is applied.⁵ There are several provisions of international law that place obligations on armed forces to ensure that men, women, boys and girls are afforded certain rights and protections during conflict. Taking account of these gendered differences in experiences of war when applying international humanitarian law will result in better protection for everyone. In other words, applying IHL with a gender perspective contributes to addressing the needs of all parts of the population. Conversely, not adequately addressing

the gendered experiences of armed conflict may result in violations of IHL.

In collaboration with the Nordic Centre for Gender in Military Operations (NCGM) and the Swedish Red Cross, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) published a report in 2024 titled "International Humanitarian Law and a Gender Perspective in the Planning and Conduct of Military Operations." By exploring the application of gender perspective in this context, the report provides guidance on how to avoid and reduce gendered harm arising from military operations.

While the obligations to implement IHL and WPS resolutions lies with states, the responsibility to integrate gender perspective in military activities and operations primarily lies with military leaders. The expectation and example set by commanders can cement or obstruct the integration of a gender perspective in the wider military organization.

To address the title of this article: is gender responsive leadership a game changer for the integration of gender perspective in NATO? It can be. It may not bring about significant change for leaders who already perform gender-responsive leadership, but for the whole of the organization it still has a massive impact in the accomplishment of its mission. If leaders are not driving gender-related change, the change will happen very slowly – if ever.

However, if leadership commits resources to the change as the new NATO policy demands, change is not only possible, but can also happen quickly. Essentially, change will only

ENDNOTES

- 1 Review at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_227578.htm
- 2 MCM-0197-2024
- 3 Review at: <https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/en/swed-int/nordic-centre-for-gender-in-military-operations/mgat/>
- 4 Kvarving, L. P. (2019) Gender Perspectives in the Armed Forces and Military Operations: An uphill battle – Cultural, structural and functional factors that prevent or promote implementation of UNSCR 1325 in the Norwegian Armed Forces and NATO. Oslo: University of Oslo
- 5 <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2022/06/30/gendered-impacts-of-armed-conflict-and-implications-for-the-application-of-ihl/>
- 6 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_TfZdIhIgg, accessed on July 7, 2025

<https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/en/swedint/nordic-centre-for-gender-in-military-operations/>



The NATO Policy on WPS and the abovementioned ICRC report on gender perspective highlight how important it is that military organizations train and exercise gender perspective. To assist the ability to train on gender perspectives in military operations, NCGM has developed a new tool addressing how to plan, execute and evaluate exercises with a gender perspective. The publication is available, together with other useful tools and publications, at the Nordic Centre for Gender in Military Operations website.