

Women, Peace, and Security in Practice: Integrating Gender into UN Peacekeeping Intelligence for Effective Civilian Protection

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Abstract

The protection of civilians (PoC) has become a central mandate of contemporary United Nations peacekeeping operations, supported by evolving doctrine, institutional reforms, and the growing institutionalization of peacekeeping intelligence (PKI) to enhance early warning, situational awareness, and preventive action. Despite these developments, UN missions continue to struggle to anticipate and prevent patterns of civilian harm, particularly sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and other gendered forms of insecurity at the community level. Existing explanations often focus on political constraints, resource limitations, or technical deficiencies. This article argues that these factors alone cannot account for persistent protection gaps. Instead, failures in anticipatory action reflect gendered intelligence blind spots deeply embedded institutional norms and practices that shape how threats are defined, what information is collected, and which risks are considered actionable within intelligence cycles.

Drawing on feminist security studies and critical intelligence scholarship, especially the work of J. Ann Tickner and Laura J. Shepherd, the article examines how gendered harms are systematically deprioritized within PKI processes. Using qualitative institutional document analysis of UN policy, doctrinal guidance, and mission evaluations, including the Department of Peace Operations guidelines on gender and intelligence, the study focuses on three multidimensional missions: United Nations Mission in South Sudan, United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic. The findings show persistent gaps between formal gender commitments and operational practice across the intelligence cycle.

The article concludes that gender-responsive intelligence is not a peripheral component of the Women, Peace and Security agenda but a core operational capability essential for anticipatory protection, mission legitimacy, and effective civilian protection. Strengthening gender integration within PKI can enhance early warning, improve decision-making, and contribute to more proactive peacekeeping.

Keywords: *Peacekeeping Intelligence, Protection of Civilians, Gendered Blind Spots, Women, Peace, and Security (WPS), UN Peacekeeping Operations*

DOI: 10.7176/IAGS/103-04

Publication date: April 30th 2026

1. Introduction

Protection of civilians has evolved from a peripheral concern to a core mission priority for UN peacekeeping (Bellamy & Williams, 2011; United Nations, 2015). Beginning with the policy shifts of the late 1990s and early 2000s, PoC is now central to UN planning, resource allocation, and evaluation (United Nations, 2019, 2020). Central to this evolution has been the growing institutionalization of peacekeeping intelligence (PKI)—formal structures like Joint Mission Analysis Centers (JMACs), All Source Information Fusion Units (ASIFUs), and standardized intelligence cycles designed to improve early warning, situational understanding, and preventive responses to threats against civilians (Dorn, 2009; Karlsrud & Smith, 2015). These structures reflect an expectation that enhanced information and analysis should enable missions to operate proactively rather than reactively (Betts, 2007).

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However, despite this progress, missions routinely struggle to anticipate and prevent forms of harm that are both widespread and deeply damaging to civilian populations (United Nations, 2020). Persistent crises involving SGBV, forced displacement, and community level coercion in contexts such as South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and the Central African Republic (CAR), illustrate significant gaps between the intelligence available to missions and the operational decisions taken to address imminent risk (Shepherd, 2016; Hudson et al., 2012).

The central puzzle addressed in this article is: Why does peacekeeping intelligence repeatedly fail to anticipate and forestall civilian harm when formal mechanisms, analytic tools, and institutional frameworks are in place? Existing explanations often emphasize political constraints, mission capacity shortfalls, host state obstruction, or technical deficiencies (Dorn, 2009; Karlsrud, 2014). While these are critical, they can obscure deeper systematic issues; specifically, how institutional norms about what constitutes a “serious” threat or a legitimate form of knowledge shape intelligence priorities (Betts, 2007; Gill & Phythian, 2018).

This article argues that peacekeeping intelligence often embeds gendered blind spots—systematic patterns of overlooking or undervaluing threats that disproportionately affect women, girls, and other marginalized groups (Shepherd, 2016; Tickner, 1992). This is not simply a matter of adding a gender check box; it reflects a need to transform how intelligence institutions define, collect, and interpret information so that they can more accurately reflect the lived realities of people in mission areas (Hudson et al., 2012).

Recent UN policy developments, including the DPO Guidelines on Gender and Peacekeeping Intelligence and the Gender Responsive UN Peacekeeping Operations Policy (2024), represent significant steps toward formalizing gender integration within PKI cycles (United Nations, 2022, 2024). Yet, as this article shows, the persistence of gendered intelligence deficiencies underscores an ongoing gap between policy commitments and operational practice (United Nations, 2020).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Protection of Civilians and UN Peacekeeping Performance

The PoC agenda emerged out of the failures of humanitarian protection in the 1990s; Rwanda and Srebrenica remain potent reminders of the consequences of inadequate preventive action (Bellamy & Williams, 2011). In response, PoC became a central component of UN peacekeeping doctrine and practice, formalized through successive policy documents and mission mandates (United Nations, 2015, 2019, 2020). PoC policy encompasses three main pillars:

- (1) Dialogue and engagement with parties to conflict and communities;
- (2) Physical protection of civilians under imminent threat; and
- (3) The establishment of a protective environment (United Nations, 2015).

Central to achieving these pillars is timely and accurate information, including threat identification, early warning, and trend analysis (Dorn, 2009). Yet, evaluations suggest persistent gaps between available information and preventive action by missions (United Nations, 2019, 2020). Often, warning signs were visible in intelligence products but were not translated into strategic responses that could avert violence (Karlsrud & Smith, 2015). This pattern suggests the need to examine how intelligence is produced and what kinds of information inform decisions on protection (Bellamy & Williams, 2011; United Nations, 2015, 2019, 2020).

2.2 Peacekeeping Intelligence and Organizational Bias

Peacekeeping intelligence functions, though formally institutionalized over the past two decades, continue to reflect organizational cultures rooted in military and security paradigms (Dorn, 2009; Karlsrud, 2014). Early reforms, notably those following the Brahimi Report, led to the creation of multi-disciplinary analytical structures (United Nations, 2000). However, critical intelligence studies argue that intelligence is not an objectively neutral practice; it is shaped by organizational norms, professional identities, and institutional

priorities (Betts, 2007; Gill & Phythian, 2018). In UN contexts, intelligence has traditionally focused on armed actors, clashes, and threats to mission personnel, often privileging quantifiable and adversary centric information over contextual forms of harm, including SGBV and community pressures (Dorn, 2009; Karlsrud & Smith, 2015). This bias not only shapes what is collected but also affects how information is analyzed and prioritized for strategic decision making (Betts, 2007; Gill & Phythian, 2018).

2.3 Gender, Security, and the WPS Agenda

Feminist security studies assert that conventional security paradigms prioritize militarized threats and overlook structural, usual, and gendered harms caused by prevailing blindness and de-prioritizations (Tickner, 1992; Hudson et al., 2012). The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, anchored in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) and subsequent resolutions, calls for the integration of gender perspectives across peace operations, including early warning and planning (United Nations Security Council, 2000). While the WPS framework has reshaped normative expectations within peacekeeping, implementation has often been uneven (Shepherd, 2016). Gender is frequently treated as a “specialist issue,” delegated to gender units or focal points rather than integrated throughout analytic and operational structures (Shepherd, 2016). As a result, the potential of WPS to influence core mission capabilities, including intelligence, has been constrained (Hudson et al., 2012; Shepherd, 2016).

2.4 Intelligence as Gendered Knowledge Production

What unites critical intelligence scholarship and feminist institutional analysis is the insight that knowledge production is inherently social and political (Betts, 2007; Gill & Phythian, 2018; Tickner, 1992). Decisions about what constitutes “credible” or “actionable” information are not neutral; they reflect underlying assumptions about whose security matters and which threats are prioritized (Shepherd, 2016). Intelligence institutions through their tasking, collection methods, analytical frameworks, and dissemination channels construct particular versions of reality that can marginalize gendered experiences of insecurity even when formal gender mainstreaming commitments exist (Hudson et al., 2012; Shepherd, 2016).

3. Peacekeeping Intelligence and the PoC Mandate

3.1 From Brahimi to the PKI Cycle

Before the Brahimi Report, the UN was cautious about formal intelligence functions due to concerns about impartiality and sovereignty (United Nations, 2000; Dorn, 2009). The Brahimi reforms marked a turning point, endorsing more structured information analysis and planning (United Nations, 2000). Over time, this has led to the development of formal PKI cycles that encompass: (1) direction and tasking; (2) information acquisition; (3) collation and analysis; (4) dissemination; and (5) evaluation and feedback (Dorn, 2009; Karlsrud & Smith, 2015). Such cycles are intended to support both strategic planning and operational decision making (Betts, 2007; Gill & Phythian, 2018). However, despite this formal architecture, the outcomes of PKI in relation to PoC have varied significantly across missions (United Nations, 2019, 2020).

3.2 The Role of Gender Integration in PKI

A significant policy advance is the formal inclusion of gender considerations within PKI frameworks (United Nations, 2022, 2024). The UN DPO Guidelines on Gender and Peacekeeping Intelligence (2022) explicitly referenced in the Gender Responsive UN Peacekeeping Operations Policy (2024) provide detailed guidance on integrating gender throughout each stage of the PKI cycle (United Nations, 2022, 2024). These guidelines emphasize that gender analysis should not be an afterthought but a foundational element of priority intelligence requirements (PIRs), specific information requirements (SIRs), and essential elements of information (EEIs) (United Nations, 2022). They clarify that gender is more than binary categories; it encompasses socially constructed roles, power relations, and intersectional dynamics including age, ethnicity, and class (Tickner, 1992; Hudson et al., 2012). Integrating such analysis allows PKI personnel to identify how conflict differently affects various segments of the population, how conflict triggers may have gendered components, and how forward looking analysis can help senior leaders make better decisions for mission safety and civilian protection (Shepherd, 2016; United Nations, 2022).

3.3 Intelligence in the PoC Framework

The official UN PoC policy links early warning and threat analysis directly to preventive protection (United Nations, 2015, 2020). While traditional intelligence has focused on armed actors and kinetic threats, the gender responsive PKI guidelines require missions to systematically incorporate gendered WPS perspectives into information collection, analysis, and reporting (United Nations, 2022, 2024). For instance, intelligence products should include data disaggregated by sex and age, and analytical frameworks should explore how gender roles influence access to information, mobility, economic participation, and exposure to harm (United Nations, 2022; Hudson et al., 2012). Moreover, Senior Mission Leadership Teams are encouraged to ensure that PIRs explicitly incorporate gender dimensions—moving beyond solely military or security centric definitions of threat to include indicators tied to SGBV, intimidation, and patterns of coercion (United Nations, 2015, 2022).

3.4 Persistent Protection Gaps

Despite these policy frameworks, evaluations of UNMISS, MONUSCO, and MINUSCA show recurring gaps between intelligence products and preventive action (United Nations, 2019, 2020). In these contexts, analytical emphasis has often remained focused on high profile clashes, political developments, or large armed group maneuvers, with less systematic attention to chronic, patterned, and gendered forms of insecurity (Shepherd, 2016; Hudson et al., 2012). This discrepancy suggests that the inclusion of formal gender guidance has yet to fully transform institutional routines, priorities, and analytic cultures within PKI structures (Betts, 2007; Gill & Phythian, 2018; United Nations, 2022).

4. Peacekeeping Intelligence: Conceptual Foundations

4.1 Defining Peacekeeping Intelligence

Peacekeeping intelligence refers to the structured process through which missions acquire, process, analyze, and disseminate information to enhance understanding of the operating environment and to inform strategic and operational decisions (Dorn, 2009; Karlsrud & Smith, 2015). PKI supports mandate delivery, enhances situational awareness, and enables anticipatory planning (United Nations, 2015, 2020). It has increasingly become institutionalized, with training programs such as the Peacekeeping Intelligence Academy introduced to equip analysts with necessary skills, including integrating gender perspectives into analytical products (United Nations, 2022, 2024).

4.2 The PKI Cycle

The intelligence cycle in UN peacekeeping typically consists of: a) Direction and Tasking, defining intelligence priorities and questions, b) Acquisition, gathering information from human, open source, technical, and partner sources, c) Collation and Analysis, synthesizing data and interpreting trends, d) Dissemination, communicating intelligence to decision makers, e) Evaluation, assessing relevance and refining requirements (Dorn, 2009; Gill & Phythian, 2018). Gender integration must be embedded in each stage, as the DPO guidelines affirm, to ensure that intelligence products account for differential impacts on diverse populations and capture gendered dynamics that may signal emerging threats (United Nations, 2022, 2024).

UN Peacekeeping Intelligence Cycle

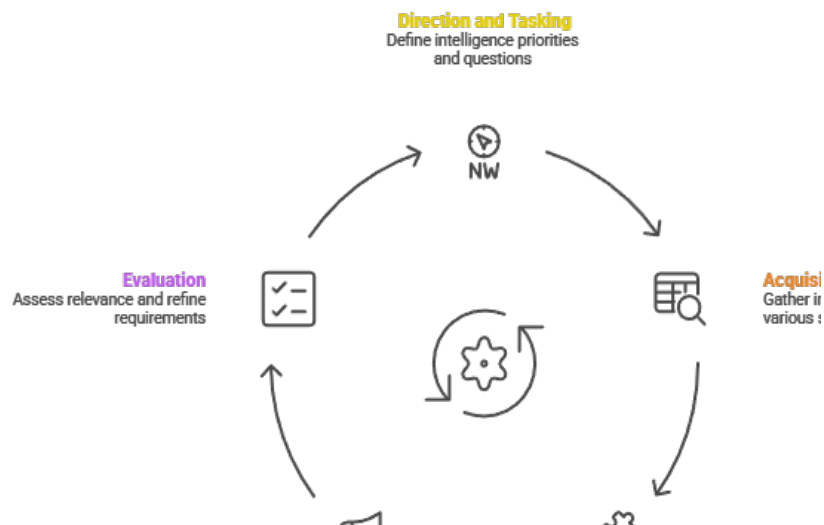


Figure 1: The intelligence cycle

4.3 Gender Integration in PKI

Integrating gender into PKI involves:

- Tasking PIRs and SIRs that explicitly consider gendered dynamics, such as SGBV patterns, mobility restrictions for women and girls, and access to services (United Nations, 2022);
- Acquisition strategies that consider diverse sources, including women's networks and community actors, to capture information often overlooked in traditional militarized information streams (Shepherd, 2016; Hudson et al., 2012);
- Analysis that disaggregates data by sex and other identity markers (United Nations, 2022);
- Dissemination that ensures gender insights influence operational planning and resource deployment (United Nations, 2024).

This aligns with the WPS mandate that gender must inform early warning and situational awareness to effectively prevent harm (United Nations Security Council, 2000; Shepherd, 2016).

5. Gendered Intelligence Blind Spots: Conceptual Framework

5.1 Defining Blind Spots

Building on critical intelligence studies and feminist epistemology, this article defines gendered intelligence blind spots as: Systematic patterns whereby institutional norms prioritize certain types of information over others, producing analytic gaps that diminish understanding of threats that disproportionately impact women, girls, and other marginalized groups (Betts, 2007; Tickner, 1992; Shepherd, 2016). These blind spots arise from routine biases that foreground militarized actors and from routines that privilege armed actors over civilian experiences, event-based violence over patterned harm, and tactical threats over structural insecurity while discounting every day, structural, and gendered harms even when formal policies explicitly call for gender integration (Hudson et al., 2012; Gill & Phythian, 2018; United Nations, 2022). Thus these blind spots rooted in:

- Prioritization of militarized threats over social and community dynamics (Dorn, 2009);
- Reliance on conventional sources that under represent gendered experiences (Shepherd, 2016);
- Analytic frameworks that emphasize event based violence while de-emphasizing patterned, structural, or chronic harms (Hudson et al., 2012);
- Operational thresholds that require high evidence before action, diminishing visibility of emerging gendered risks (Betts, 2007; United Nations, 2020).

These blind spots reflect broader institutional cultures that shape intelligence as a discipline and practice, influencing not just what data is collected but how it is interpreted and acted upon (Gill & Phythian, 2018; Shepherd, 2016).

5.2 How Blind Spots Manifest in the PKI Cycle

Table 1. Gendered Intelligence Blind Spots across the PKI Cycle

PKI Stage	Dominant Institutional Bias	Gendered Consequence	PoC Impact
Direction & Tasking	PIRs focused on armed actors and tactical threats	Gendered threats under-specified	Weak early warning signals
Acquisition	Reliance on militarized and conventional sources	Under-reporting of SGBV & coercion	Incomplete threat picture
Analysis	Privileging event-based violence over patterned harm	Marginalization of structural insecurity	Misestimated risk levels
Dissemination & Decision	High thresholds for operational action	Delayed preventive measures	Reactive protection responses

This framework highlights how institutional biases can shape what is known and what remains invisible even when gender guidance exists on paper.

6. Methodology

This study employs qualitative institutional document analysis, focusing on UN PoC policy, PKI policy and guidance (including the 2022/2024 gender and PKI guidelines), WPS frameworks, Secretary General reports, and mission evaluations (United Nations, 2015, 2019, 2020, 2022, 2024). The analysis examines how threats are defined, which sources are prioritized, and what triggers operational decisions, with particular attention to gendered dimensions of risk (Shepherd, 2016; Hudson et al., 2012). Three multidimensional missions UNMISS (South Sudan), MONUSCO (DRC), and MINUSCA (CAR) were selected as study because each combines strong PoC mandates, developed intelligence structures, and ongoing protection challenges (United Nations, 2019, 2020). Through document coding and thematic analysis, the study identifies patterns in threat framing, analytic practices, and operational responses, focusing on the visibility or marginalization of gendered forms of harm (Gill & Phythian, 2018; Betts, 2007).

7. Protection of Civilians and Gendered Intelligence Blind Spots

7.1 Failure to Anticipate Patterns of Harm

Across peacekeeping missions, patterns of gendered harm often surface well before major escalation (Hudson et al., 2012; Shepherd, 2016). Indicators such as restrictions on women’s mobility, increased incidents of coercive social control, or shifts in domestic gender norms can signal deeper social fragmentation (Tickner, 1992; Hudson et al., 2012) — early warning signals often neglected in traditional PKI practice (Dorn, 2009; Betts, 2007). Gendered intelligence blind spots mean that such signs are not integrated into PIRs, deprioritized in tasking or

insufficiently analyzed to influence operational planning, resulting in delayed responses that undermine PoC efforts (United Nations, 2020; United Nations, 2022).

7.2 Differential Access and Source Bias

Traditional intelligence collection methods including patrols, human intelligence sources, and technical means often privilege access to male dominated spaces or leadership networks, leading to under representation of women’s experiences and perspectives (Shepherd, 2016; Hudson et al., 2012). Without intentional gender outreach strategies and mixed gender analytical teams, missions risk missing critical insights into community vulnerabilities and early signals of harm (United Nations, 2022, 2024). Gender balance within PKI units and analytical perspective promoted under the Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy can help expand access to diverse sources and improve information quality (United Nations, 2024).

7.3 Operational Decision Making and Gender Signals

Even when gendered information exists, operational thresholds and analytic cultures may interpret such data as less actionable than conventional militarized threats (Betts, 2007; Gill & Phythian, 2018). This can lead to misallocation of resources, delayed preventive measures, and a narrowed definition of what constitutes a “security threat” (United Nations, 2020). Institutional incentives and analytic training that reinforce traditional threat hierarchies exacerbate these patterns (Dorn, 2009; Karlsrud, 2014). The DPO guidelines attempt to counteract this by explicitly integrating gender into analytic frameworks, but implementation challenges remain (United Nations, 2022, 2024).

8. Case Examples and Illustrations

While this article focuses on policy and conceptual analysis, qualitative mission evaluations in contexts like South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and the Central African Republic (CAR) consistently show that information about patterns of SGBV and community pressures was available but did not prompt early preventive action (United Nations, 2019, 2020). The disconnection between intelligence products and operational decisions underscores the need for systemic integration of gender analysis within PKI (Shepherd, 2016; United Nations, 2022).

8.1 UNMISS (South Sudan)

In South Sudan, cycles of inter-communal violence and political instability have repeatedly been accompanied by significant SGBV, restrictions on women’s mobility, and gendered impacts on livelihoods (United Nations, 2019; Hudson et al., 2012). UNMISS reporting identified early indicators such as heightened control over women’s movements, targeted intimidation of civic actors, and disruptions in market access—yet formal PKI products often emphasized elite political movements and armed group activities (United Nations, 2020; Dorn, 2009). Consequently, gendered indicators were deprioritized in priority PIRs, leading to operational responses that were more reactive than preventive (United Nations, 2020, 2022).

8.2 MONUSCO (DRC)

Eastern DRC is marked by long standing patterns of sexual violence and community predation that affect women and girls disproportionately (Hudson et al., 2012; Shepherd, 2016). Intelligence products often emphasize territorial control, shifting alliances among armed groups, and clashes—but less so the patterns of sexual violence that reflect broader threats to community security (Karlsrud, 2014; United Nations, 2020). Despite extensive reporting on such harms, they have not consistently been operationalized into strategic PIRs that could drive pre-emptive deployment of protective assets or community engagement plans (United Nations, 2020, 2022).

8.3 MINUSCA (CAR)

In CAR, armed groups use everyday coercion and gendered intimidation as tools of control (United Nations, 2019; Hudson et al., 2012). Despite this, mission intelligence assessments tended to foreground clashes and

political spoilers, while frequent, lower level threats affecting women's safety, mobility, and livelihoods were less systematically captured in analytic frameworks (Dorn, 2009; Shepherd, 2016). This resulted in persistent threats going underreported in strategic summaries, contributing to delayed or inadequate responses (United Nations, 2020).

9. Discussion: Policy and Operational Implications

9.1 Rethinking Intelligence Failure

The cases underscore that peacekeeping intelligence failures are not merely technical but institutional (Betts, 2007; Gill & Phythian, 2018). Gendered blind spots reflect deeply held assumptions about what constitutes a "security threat" and whose harm is prioritized (Tickner, 1992; Shepherd, 2016). These blind spots mean that even when information about gendered harms exists, it may not be recognized as critical, integrated into analytic products, or funneled into operational decision making (United Nations, 2020, 2022).

9.2 Gender as Operational Capacity

Integrating gender analysis enhances operational effectiveness by broadening the analytical lens and capturing forms of harm that may be precursors to larger crises (Hudson et al., 2012; Shepherd, 2016). The DPO Guidelines on Gender and Peacekeeping Intelligence provide concrete mechanisms to incorporate gender across the PKI cycle, from tasking to analysis, thereby positioning gender as integral to core operations rather than a peripheral concern (United Nations, 2022, 2024). Such integration improves anticipation of threats, augments mission legitimacy, and supports more nuanced community engagement (United Nations, 2015, 2020).

9.3 Implications for the WPS Agenda

Without transforming intelligence practices to fully incorporate gender analysis, the WPS agenda risks remaining rhetorical rather than operational (Shepherd, 2016). Intelligence institutions represent a critical, yet under leveraged, site for mainstreaming gender into mission planning and responses (Hudson et al., 2012). The existence of formal guidelines referenced and reinforced in the Gender Responsive UN Peacekeeping Operations Policy (2024) offers a foundation, but changing analytic culture and routines remains a significant challenge (United Nations, 2022, 2024).

9.4 Institutionalizing Gender in Intelligence

The integration of gender into PKI is not optional but operationally imperative (United Nations, 2022, 2024). Policy frameworks like the Gender Responsive Peacekeeping Policy (2024) and the DPO Guidelines on Gender and Peacekeeping Intelligence provide clear mandates and analytical tools (United Nations, 2022, 2024). However, realization of these frameworks requires sustained investment in institutionalization including analytical tools, data systems, training, and gender balanced staffing (Shepherd, 2016; United Nations, 2020).

9.5 Training and Capacity Building

Gender responsive PKI demands integrated training that equips analysts and commanders with tools to identify and interpret gendered threats (United Nations, 2022, 2024). Programs like the Peacekeeping Intelligence Academy are critical, but training must go beyond technical modules to incorporate gender theory, feminist security insights, and community engagement practices (Tickner, 1992; Hudson et al., 2012; Shepherd, 2016).

9.6 Accountability and Leadership

Leadership at all levels must embed gender in analytic requirements and operational planning (United Nations, 2015, 2024). Gender advisers and focal points play essential roles, but responsibility for gender responsive intelligence must rest with senior mission leadership, who set analytic priorities and operational thresholds (United Nations, 2020, 2022).

10. Conclusion

This article has argued that persistent protection failures in UN peacekeeping are partly rooted in institutionalized gendered intelligence blind spots (Betts, 2007; Shepherd, 2016; Gill & Phythian, 2018). These blind spots systematically deprioritize or overlook gendered forms of harm, undermining missions' capacity to anticipate and prevent violence (Hudson et al., 2012; United Nations, 2020). Addressing this requires transformative changes in how PKI functions conceptualize gender, structured analytic requirements, and link intelligence products to operational decisions (United Nations, 2022, 2024). The UN DPO Guidelines on Gender and Peacekeeping Intelligence and the Gender Responsive Peacekeeping Policy (2024) represent significant steps toward institutionalizing gender within intelligence, but ongoing efforts are needed to translate policy into consistent operational practice (United Nations, 2022, 2024). Gender responsive intelligence is not an optional add on it is essential for fulfilling PoC mandates and enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of UN peacekeeping operations (United Nations, 2015, 2020; Shepherd, 2016).

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