



INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE WOMEN AND UN PEACE OPERATIONS. OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY REPORT



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ABSTRACT

This second international conference organized by the *Uruguayan Armed Forces Elsie Project- strategies for increasing women's meaningful participation in UN Peace operations*, took place last December 12th, 2024, at the Army Military Institute of Higher Studies. It was an opportunity to share good practices, lessons learned and challenges for a meaningful participation of women in peace and security activities, including UN peace operations.

The Project is led by the Ministry of National Defense and counts on UN Women and the Uruguayan Agency for International Cooperation (AUCI) as its strategic partners. The international conference is among the eight project's activities, carried out to increase voluntary participation of women in UN peace operations in quantitative and qualitative terms, and to achieve a greater availability of Uruguayan Armed Forces eligible women to be deployed particularly in operational roles. In addition, it aims to raise greater awareness of the obstacles women face when applying to deploy and to improve deployment conditions of military personnel in Un Peace Operations.

The conference's **overall objective** was to share good practices and lessons learned in the process of achieving meaningful participation of women in UN peace operations and to discuss on the opportunities and challenges deriving from current and future scenarios.

Its **specific objectives** were to share good practices and lessons learned about the implementation of UN Security Council's *Women, Peace and Security agenda* and its respective WPS National Action Plans and in promoting women's participation in peace and security activities, including Peace Operations. Additionally, the conference aimed to create

a space for reflecting on the progress and the way to go towards meaningful participation of women from Uruguayan and other countries' Armed Forces in UN Peace Operations.

Target audience

The conference was attended by national and international leaders and representatives from the United Nations, bilateral organizations, State agencies, members of the Armed Forces of Uruguay and the region's, decision-makers at national level and the academia. The Elsie Fund Manager, the Canadian Ambassador for Women, Peace and Security, RESDAL Executive Director and the UN Office to Respond to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse military advisor on gender were among the distinguished panelists.

In sum, 235 persons attended the conference making use of both modalities available, 117 participants including 33 women and 26 men from the Armed Forces were in-person and 118 watched the event on the UN Women LAC YouTube channel.

The conference was divided into three modules that combine experts' presentations, discussions and experience sharing from the ground as well reflections on the future ahead.

Contents

The opening remarks were given by members of the Project's Steering Committee, Army General (Rtd.) Marcelo M. Montaner Undersecretary of National Defense and Claudia Romano, Manager of the Uruguayan Agency for International Cooperation (AUCI). The Undersecretary of Defense highlighted the talent of women in military organizations and based on his own experience in Peace Operations, he stressed the importance of the presence of women in combat field, *"I recall women doctors assisting soldiers under fire in Bunia"* he said. He referred to Canada's support and stressed that the participation of military and civilians is vital to the Uruguayan government and so he expects to see that more women are deployed performing significant roles in UN Peace Operations.

On AUCI's behalf, manager Claudia Romano remarked that Uruguay's presence in peacekeeping missions is recognized worldwide and that increasing women's participation in UN Peace Operations generates greater opportunities. She concluded by sharing her desire that lessons learned in Project implementation in Uruguay might be shared with other countries in the region.

Both authorities pointed out the importance of Uruguay being a pioneer in the implementation of a Project of this nature, as a clear sign of the commitment to the contribution to UN Peace Operations.

Module I. UN Security Council's Women, Peace and Security Agenda and National Action Plans: practices and lessons learned from experiences in the Southern Cone

This module provided with an opportunity to exchange experiences implemented in the various areas of the *Women, Peace and Security Agenda* at the national and regional level, including UN peace operations and WPS National Action Plans adaptability to each country's context.

The Uruguayan Elsie Project coordinator, Carina de los Santos presented the experience of this project implementation in Uruguay, supported by the Elsie Initiative Fund. The Project seeks to accelerate the pace of change in the participation of women in Uruguayan Armed Forces units deployed to UN Peace Operations, but also to generating greater knowledge about the obstacles that persist to the increase in women's deployment. She pointed out that Uruguay is recognized as the main contributor of women in these Operations in the continent and it was the first country to develop a barriers and opportunities Study applying the Elsie Initiative methodology designed for these purposes.

Module II. Good practices and lessons learned in promoting women's participation in peace and security activities

This module provided presenters with an opportunity to share successful experiences and challenges in promoting women's active role in peace and security activities.

The Elsie Fund manager, Deborah Warren-Smith, presented the progress made by means of supporting UN troop/police contributing countries in developing actions to increase the participation of women in UN Peace Operations, including research on barriers and opportunities for women to deploy. She referred to the role of women in leadership positions, performing un-stereotyped functions, such as the so-called *gender strong units*, which are units mostly composed of women. *We understand that this kind of deployments are very ambitious, but some countries like Senegal or Ghana have succeeded in confirming them*, she mentioned.

Module III: Promoting Women's Participation in UN Peace Operations: Progress and Challenges for the Future

Among the approximately 95,000 peacekeepers who made up peacekeepers in 2020, women made up 4.8 per cent of military contingents. The UN Security Council set a target of 15% for women serving in military contingents and 25% for Military Observers and Staff Officers by 2028.

This module brought the audience closer to the field of UN Peace Operations. A distinctive note was provided by the connection with the Uruguayan Contingent deployed in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). Colonel Martín Álvarez, Commander of the Army Contingent and Battalion, First Lieutenant Paula Rivero and First Corporal Valeria Castro, both members of the Battalion shared their deployment experience and insights.

At the **closing ceremony**, Elsie Initiative Fund Representative Deborah Warren-Smith invited the audience to remain *curious, to ask why and how, to have a strategic mind at technical and operational levels; to be persistent in order to observe a change in terms of women in Peace Operations, but also at the civilian level; keep eyes and minds open and always ask why*, he said.

Magdalena Furtado, representative of UN Women, Uruguay, offered words of gratitude for the holding of the international conference. *To learn and reflect, it is an accumulative process that little by little is reaping fruits. Formal equality has been achieved in the region, but not yet in practice. Today we are working to close these gaps*, she emphasized.

General E. (R) Marcelo M. Montaner, Undersecretary of National Defense, concluded by referring to the moral aspect of the Armed Forces. *Many people have lost their lives in the service of Peace Operations. Whenever we deploy on the ground, we remember the fallen comrades who never returned*. Finally, he reaffirmed his understanding of the role of women in these scenarios. *Women in the Armed Forces have equal spaces, salaries, responsibilities and obligations, so that along with their efforts and talents they can reach all the positions they aspire to. The most important aspect is to maintain the prestigious image of the Armed Forces abroad, which requires men and women's coordinated efforts*.

CONFERENCE'S FEEDBACK SURVEY RESULTS

At the end of the conference, a feedback survey designed by the UAF Elsie Project monitoring and evaluation specialist, Elena Backer, was carried out with the main purpose of knowing attendees' perceptions about Peace Operations, before and after the conference. For measuring purposes, the perception was classified as *Mainly positive / Mainly negative / Positive and negative equally / No information*.

As a result, positive perception rose from 69% before the conference to 88% after it. The survey also made it possible to relate these perceptions to other analysis variables considered in the Project, such as the roles of military personnel, their experience in Peace Operations, and interest in deploying. Regarding interest in deploying, both men and women stated that the experiences shared at the conference generated a (new) interest to deploy, with a slightly greater impact on women. Finally, most male military participants and 100% of women reported that they found shared experiences useful.

GOOD PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Achievement of conference objectives. This UAF Elsie Project second international conference allowed us to inform, disseminate the opinion of experts and to share the first-hand testimony of women who participated in UN Peace Operations. This sharing of constructive experiences contributed to mitigating the barrier related to the perceptions of the experiences of others and their negative impact on the voluntariness to deploy.

Good participation of women from the Armed Forces. More than 50% of the members of the Armed Forces attending the conference were women, who since then have valuable inputs to evaluate their participation in Peace Operations. This was possible thanks to the coordinated efforts of the project team with the MoD and the UAF who facilitated an important attendance in days of challenging agendas.

Perceptions and interest of women in Peace Operations. The survey data showed positive changes in women's perception and an increase in interest in Peace Operations. While perception improved by 19% among conference attendees, the improvement was more significant among women.

Teamwork and commitment from Uruguay. The event was made possible thanks to the coordinated work of the Project associates. In this sense, this second conference was specially supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, evidencing the importance of the Elsie Project as part of the Uruguayan foreign policy. It also followed the UN peacekeeping ministerial preparatory meeting, co-organized by Uruguay, Japan and the United Kingdom and which took place on December 10 and 11, 2024, in Montevideo.

It is reassuring to note the commitment of the Uruguayan State in the implementation of the Elsie Project, role modelling for other States aspiring to find their way towards empowering women's participation in UN Peace Operations.

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