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ISF Women, Peace and Security Helpdesk

# Women in security decision-making

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The Women Peace and Security Helpdesk, managed by Saferworld in partnership with Conciliation Resources, GAPS UK, University of Durham and Women International Peace Centre (WIPC), was established in December 2021 to increase capability across the UK Government on WPS policy and programming in order to make its work on conflict and instability more effective. If you work for the UK government and you would like to send a task request, please email us at [wpshelpdesk@saferworld.org.uk](mailto:wpshelpdesk@saferworld.org.uk). If you do not work for the UK government but have an enquiry about the helpdesk or this report, please email us at [enquiries.wpshelpdesk@saferworld.org.uk](mailto:enquiries.wpshelpdesk@saferworld.org.uk)

Direct Audience: MOD Human Security team

Suggested Internal Distribution: Other teams at MOD and FCDO Women, Peace and Security team

Confidentiality Status: None



# Task Overview

## Title of Task:

Women in security decision making

## Requesting Officer:

Security, Policy Operations, Global Issues, Human Security in Defence

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## Terms of Reference:

### Background to assignment

The Human Security (HS) in Defence team co-owns the WPS NAP together with the FCDO. The HS team look to drive forward this agenda into UK Defence as well as overseas. The first pillar of the WPS NAP is on participation. It would be valuable to highlight evidence for the strategic importance and impact of women in security decision-making. Such evidence for the impact of women in security decision making could help to strengthen the inclusion and participation of women in Defence and the security sector overall. Currently it is unclear what evidence exists at present.

### Purpose of assignment

To conduct a literature review of research into women in security decision making and identify what research and findings already exist that speak to the impact of women in security decision making. In particular, it would be good to understand if greater numbers of women, or mixed gender decision making teams lead to more conflict sensitive outcomes. While there is evidence that women mediators lead to more enduring peace settlements, it would be good to see if there are any statistics or evidence in respect of security decision making on a wider array of topics. This could include:

- Decisions to take military action – inclusive of combat action.
- Approaches to humanitarian and crisis response.
- Approaches to counter terrorism.
- Overseas defence engagement and diplomacy.
- Military equipment and sales.
- Do mixed gender military units generate more conflict sensitive outcomes in peacekeeping or battlefield settings?

Do we see more stable outcomes or less conflict prone outcomes when women are in decision making roles or there are mixed gender teams? Similarly, is there any evidence around female leadership and global conflict. Eg. If a military has a higher number of female senior leaders do we see less participation in global conflict? Or do we see greater domestic or regional stability? What about female political leaders? Do we see a reduced chance of violent conflict? Is there a correlation between female leadership and conflict outcomes?

Invariably, there is a second order question if we do find a correlation between female leaders or mixed gender decision making teams and improved conflict outcomes. What is it about female involvement that results in better conflict outcomes? There is also another attendant question: By what metric do we determine a conflict outcome to be “better” or “conflict sensitive” or “stable”?

A literature review of existing research and analysis would be useful as a starting point which can then influence what kind of further work is required in this area. It would be useful for the review to explicitly highlight where there are particular gaps in research.

### **Task presentation**

A written product that sets out the literature review and highlights the evidence and its sources is required. A maximum of 5 pages would be preferred, however length is flexible. The aim is to have clarity on evidence.

### **Intended audience**

The MOD Human Security team are the primary intended audience. While this information would be useful to support our efforts more broadly, there are multiple forthcoming opportunities where evidence can be used to strengthen the arguments on the importance of women’s participation in the security and Defence sector. An international event on WPS in Defence sponsored by the UK is being hosted in Bosnia-Herzegovina on the 6-8 November. The HS team will be presenting our approach to WPS in Defence and the importance of women’s inclusion. It would be ideal if we could speak to any evidence for women’s inclusion then. Beyond this, there will be multiple domestic and international avenues where evidence garnered from the helpdesk could be utilised. It will also be likely shared with the FCDO Women, Peace and Security team.

# Abstract

This report highlights the value of gender diversity, in particular women's inclusion, for effective decision-making in defence and security contexts. Studies across various fields show that women's participation often leads to more collaborative, less confrontational decision-making, reducing escalation in crisis situations. However, military culture and gender biases present barriers to fully integrating women's voices and limit the potential to realise women's positive influence on decision-making. To address this, research indicates that prioritising women in leadership roles can enhance team dynamics and reduce gender penalties, contributing to improved decision-making.

# Summary

A core aim of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda is women's meaningful participation across all decision-making aspects of peace and security, including defence. Women's involvement is seen as crucial for ensuring diverse perspectives are incorporated at the strategic level and enabling the legitimacy of policy outcomes. Inclusive decision-making structures are essential to ensure voices from minoritised groups, including women, are heard. Although the literature supports the benefits of women's equal participation in peace processes, research on their impact in defence and security remains more limited, despite its strategic importance in Joint Service Publication (JSP) 985 and the United Kingdom's (UK) National Action Plan on WPS. However, a review of the extant literature highlights that women's inclusion can contribute to more effective decision-making in defence and security settings.

Women in military settings are often valued for fulfilling specific cultural or engagement roles, but they also have the potential to bring strategic leadership capabilities to improve decision-making—which could be further realised. Specifically, because gender diversity in decision-making enhances strategic thinking, innovation, and resilience, especially in high-stakes or crisis situations.

Women's approach to decision-making is generally more collegial, collaborative, and less conflict-driven, helping prevent unnecessary escalation during crises. Experimental data indicates that women-only and mixed-gender teams are generally more communicative and less conflict-prone than men-only groups. In addition, with a woman leading a decision-making process, there is increased communication and collaboration.

Beyond the impact of women on the process of decision-making, there are more limited studies on the outcomes. However, one seminal study involving a crisis simulation reveals that men tend to act more aggressively, acquiring weapons and escalating hostilities.

Despite evidence showing that women's inclusion enhances decision-making processes and outcomes in defence and security, barriers still prevent their full and meaningful participation. Notably, embedded gender biases, including in military settings, often require women to 'prove themselves' to be accepted in leadership, impacting their potential influence in decision-making settings. Women leaders face unique pressures, as gender biases, including in crisis situations, can result in a 'double bind', where they must balance assertiveness with expectations of communal traits like empathy and compassion.

The evidence on how to address this is clear: research suggests that tackling individual bias has limited effectiveness. Instead, efforts should focus on implementing institutional measures to restrict individuals' ability to act on these biases. There is a need to focus not only on increasing women's representation but also on ensuring they have an influential voice, especially in men-majority teams where their impact can be muted. For example, through women leading on decision-making processes.

Further research focused on UK defence would be beneficial to understand how gender diversity impacts the outcomes of crisis decisions, not just the processes, along with an understanding of how leadership is taught and which qualities are valued by the military.

# Background and introduction

A central concern of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda (WPS) is women's meaningful participation. This includes not only peace processes and peace mediation but also all aspects of decision-making related to peace and security, including defence and the conduct of hostilities. Women's participation is deemed to be crucial for fostering diverse perspectives and enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of policy outcomes. Fostering inclusive decision-making structures is therefore essential for creating spaces for the voices of minoritised groups, including women, to be heard.

While there is a significant body of literature that provides evidence of the benefits of women's full, equal, meaningful, and safe participation in peace processes,<sup>1</sup> research that focuses specifically on the impact of women's inclusion in defence and security remains more limited. This is notwithstanding the fact that participation in security and defence processes underpins a key strategic objective of Joint Service Publication (JSP) 985 and the United Kingdom's (UK) National Action Plan on WPS.

Defence and security decision-making can concern a wide range of domains, from decisions to take military action—including combat action, approaches to humanitarian and crisis response, approaches to counter terrorism, overseas defence engagement and diplomacy, military equipment and sales—to peacekeeping and on the battlefield.

A key characteristic of some defence decision-making, including in operations, is that it often takes place in highly pressurised environments with high stakes. It is possible to draw on a body of evidence related to crisis leadership to better understand why the inclusion of women and other minoritised groups can strengthen decision-making processes in these settings.

Though this report focuses predominantly on women, it seeks to avoid essentialising women's contributions; rather, the emphasis is on the value of diversity to decision-making. As an underrepresented group in defence, women can, though should not be presumed to, provide diverse perspectives from the status quo, understood as decision-making predominately led by men who are overrepresented in such roles across defence. Other minoritised groups within defence, including people of colour and those with other protected characteristics, can, though again should not be presumed to, contribute to diversity in decision-making.

## Methodology and tools

The research was conducted through desk-based methods, with a primary focus on producing a comprehensive literature review. This approach involved the systematic identification, analysis, and synthesis of existing academic and policy-related sources to

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Caprioli and Mark Boyer, 'Gender, Violence, and International Crisis', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45, no. 4 (2001): 395–444.

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provide a foundational understanding of the topic and to highlight key themes and gaps within the current body of knowledge. This included literature not only on decision-making and leadership in a military context but also, more broadly in comparable contexts for example, on political leadership and in relation to business.



# Findings and analysis

## 1

### Gender and diversity for effective decision-making

There is a clear policy drive for women's full and meaningful participation in defence and security decisions, but what difference does gender diversity and women's meaningful inclusion have on decision-making? While specific research on this topic within defence and security remains limited, relevant literature from other fields offers insights and lessons that can be effectively translated to these domains. This includes literature on decision-making in different crisis contexts.

#### Defence culture and decision-making

The reception of women in decision-making roles within security is closely linked to the gendered institutional structures embedded within defence and military organisations and in society more widely. As Erwin notes,

*“Throughout its history and in its many organizational forms the military has remained an organization where gender matters. Gender is not some outlying factor which must be taken into consideration and addressed but rather is an inherent and integral aspect of the structuring of the organization and subsequently members’ experiences. It reflects the realities that the concepts of jobs, hierarchies, and the organizations contained within are not gender-neutral. Rather they reflect expectations.”<sup>2</sup>*

Women encounter significant barriers not only in attaining leadership positions in defence and security but also in fully participating in decision-making processes, even when they achieve such roles. These challenges are often shaped by gendered assumptions regarding the roles women can or should occupy. Consequently, there is a pressing need to prioritise inclusive decision-making frameworks that address these biases.

#### The impact of gender on the decision-making process during crisis

Crisis decision-making differs from routine decision-making due to high threats, limited time, and, in some cases, an increased risk of military conflict. For example, state leaders must make rapid and strategic decisions during a crisis to manage escalating situations effectively.<sup>3</sup> It happens in other contexts too, both civilian and military, such as during sudden emergencies, escalating tensions, strategic shifts, or operational failures.

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<sup>2</sup> Stephanie K. Erwin, ‘The Complex Relationship between Leadership and Gendered Experiences: As and With’, *Defence Studies* 23, no. 1 (2 January 2023): 25–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2022.2092473>.

<sup>3</sup> Tara E. Santmire et al., ‘The Impact of Cognitive Diversity on Crisis Negotiations’, *Political Psychology* 19, no. 4 (December 1998): 721–48, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0162-895X.00129>.

With limited information and high stakes, leaders must act quickly while exercising sound judgment. In such scenarios, decision makers often lack sufficient information or time to evaluate it properly, leading to decisions based on past experiences and beliefs rather than careful analysis, which increases the likelihood of suboptimal outcomes. Crises are particularly dangerous as they can escalate quickly to violence. Research shows that intense crises can narrow focus, create cognitive rigidity, and distort time perception, impacting on the ability to make an effective decision.<sup>4</sup>

A number of studies have looked to recreated crisis conditions to test decision-making and the impact of gender, which will be explored as the report continues. For example, Boyer et al.<sup>5</sup> draw on experimental data, in this case an online simulation game with middle and high school students in the United States (US) called 'GenderEd', with students assigned to particular states and a simulated response to an emerging crisis in international politics. While these findings focus on adolescents, who are an easier sample to study, other studies in this report that examine adult samples also support these conclusions.<sup>6</sup> They seek to understand how gender influences international negotiations through the decision-making process. They find that gendered perceptions of participants had a significant influence on outcomes. Specifically, though students were not told the gender of the simulation coordinator (or leader), whether they assumed it was a man or a woman had a bearing on how they approached the simulation. Notably, with a woman perceived to be in this leadership role, participants were more communicative. They found groups of all men to be more conflictual and prone to escalation, while groups of all women were found to be more conciliatory with other groups. Groups of all men tended to be less communicative, sending fewer messages, than all women or mixed gender groups. More specifically, they note that

*"In sum, our results do suggest that gender plays a significant role in social and political interaction, at least as such interactions are manifest in our simulated negotiation process. These findings also indicate that as more and more women become actively involved in political decision making, both the process and the types of interactions may change. Diversity in gender will thus bring with it diversity in viewpoints, and diversity in the ways we consider the issues at hand."*

### The impact of gender on decision-making outcomes during crisis

The impact of gender on decision-making outcomes is another key element to examine. Another study which sought to recreate decision-making in a crisis simulation was conducted by McDermott and Cowden<sup>7</sup> and supports Boyer et al's findings. This

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<sup>4</sup> M Brecher, *Crisis in World Politics: Theory and Reality* (Pergamon Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Mark A. Boyer et al., 'Gender and Negotiation: Some Experimental Findings from an International Negotiation Simulation', *International Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (March 2009): 23–47, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2008.01522.x>.

<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that experimental research often relies on school children as participants for several key reasons. Schools provide a structured and accessible environment where researchers can study a relatively large and diverse group under controlled conditions. Children are also an important demographic for studying cognitive and social development, as their behaviours and learning processes can offer insights into how skills, attitudes, and biases form over time. Another advantage is that children tend to have fewer entrenched beliefs and prior experiences than adults, making them valuable for examining fundamental psychological and behavioural mechanisms.

<sup>7</sup> Rose McDermott and Jonathan A. Cowden, 'The Effects of Uncertainty and Sex in a Crisis Simulation Game', *International Interactions* 27, no. 4 (September 2001): 353–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050620108434990>.

involved conducting a war game crisis simulation with 100 male and female participants who then interacted with each other through the nature of the game. Across four decision-making cycles, “each participant made procurement choices, took actions related to the conflict, including decisions about initiating war, completed questionnaires assessing characteristics like perceived hostility and trustworthiness of themselves and their opponents, and composed messages”. The findings revealed a strong link between weapons acquisition and perceived hostility, with men more likely to acquire weapons than women, and men four times as likely as women to engage in hostile behaviour. They also found that over the course of the experiment, men and women “did not get more or less a like”; in other words, interacting across genders did not change initial attitudes. Men remained more hostile in their interactions, while women were more conciliatory, making men more prone to escalate situations to war than women.

Beyond McDermott and Coweden’s study, there is less literature on outcomes to draw on in comparison to the impact of gender on the process. For example, while Boyer et al did seek to test for the impact of gender on outcomes, they concluded that while adding “women into decision making settings may well have an impact on the process... we cannot conclude yet that it will make a difference regarding the outcomes of that process”.

The research presented here highlights the significant influence of gender on security decision-making, reinforcing the need for further investigation into how gender dynamics shape perceptions, roles, and operational effectiveness in military contexts. While McDermott and Coweden’s findings provide valuable insights, going forward their conclusions should be examined alongside broader empirical evidence to assess their generalisability and policy relevance. Future research is required to achieve this; it should explore how gendered institutional structures impact decision-making processes, and whether integrating diverse perspectives can enhance strategic and operational outcomes.

## 2

### Perceptions of women in military/defence/security settings

Military culture has a particular influence on women’s role in decision-making in military/defence settings. As women are further integrated into the military, this in turn shapes military culture. This section thus examines the role of women in military operations, using the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) as a key example. It highlights how women were often assigned specific roles, such as participating in Female Engagement Teams (FETs), to address cultural barriers in Afghanistan. While FETs provided strategic advantages by enabling engagement with local women and improving intelligence gathering, their use also reflects broader patterns of gendered institutional structures within the military. Drawing on Hardt and von Hlatky’s study, this section explores how gender integration is shaped by military culture, influencing both the perception and reception of female soldiers in operational contexts.

The ISAF is often given as an example of where women have provided particular value to the military. Women were seen as a solution to a particular set of challenges, notably

engaging in Afghan culture for information gathering, with military woman able to engage with civilian women in ways military men could not. This included through the use of FETs.<sup>8</sup> FETs were perceived by men and women in Afghanistan as a part of a ‘third gender’ and “extended the respect shown to men, but also granted access to the home and family normally reserved for women”.<sup>9</sup>

The use of FETs fits a wider pattern of the recruitment of military women, where they are often assigned to particular, often times subordinate, roles and contribute to the gendered institutional structure which underpins defence and the military.<sup>10</sup> As demonstrated by Hardt and von Hlatky's<sup>11</sup> study on gender integration in military operations, the gendered institutional logics embedded within military culture have significant implications for the ways in which women are both received and perceived within these contexts. They drew on interviews with 43 active-duty US personnel and veterans who served in both mixed-gender and male-only units as part of the ISAF in Afghanistan. They

*“found strong qualitative empirical support for our theory that intergroup contact [between genders] permitted soldiers to make instrumentally-focused observations of operational benefits related to female soldiers and the performance of discrete tasks, such as local engagement with host communities. Many soldiers viewed gender integration as increasing the military’s access to information as a result of these local connections and as improving the US military’s ability to influence the views of people in local Afghan communities.”*

To summarise, the research found strong real-world evidence that when male and female soldiers worked together, it helped them recognise the practical benefits of having women in the military. Many soldiers saw gender integration as an advantage, particularly in tasks like engaging with local communities. They believed that having female soldiers improved the military’s ability to gather information and positively influence local Afghan populations.

### How to include women in defence/security decision-making

As Hardt and von Hlatky<sup>12</sup> note, there is a need to avoid essentialism of women’s contribution; in other words, presuming that women can only contribute in certain ways and add value to specific tasks. Such perceptions have been shown in Kronsell’s<sup>13</sup> study of the Swedish Defence Force to hinder women’s full and meaningful inclusion in the

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<sup>8</sup> Keally McBride and Annick T.R. Wibben, ‘The Gendering of Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan’, *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 3, no. 2 (2012): 199–215.

<sup>9</sup> Brigitte Rohwerder, ‘Lessons from Female Engagement Teams’, *GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report 1186*, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> J Mathers, ‘Women and State Military Forces’, in *Women and War: Contested Histories, Uncertain Futures*, ed. Carol Cohn (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 124–45.

<sup>11</sup> Heidi Hardt and Stéfanie Von Hlatky, ‘Local Engagement and U.S. Military Attitudes toward Gender Integration: Evidence from Afghanistan’, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 26 August 2024, 1–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2024.2391261>.

<sup>12</sup> Hardt and Von Hlatky.

<sup>13</sup> Annica Kronsell, *Gender, Sex and the Postnational Defense: Militarism and Peacekeeping* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

military, through further entrenching gendered notions of what defence is and who can contribute and how.

The inclusion of women in the military, or in this case in security and defence decision-making, is often based on the assumption that they bring a different perspective and will be able to express it. This involves simply ‘adding women and stirring’ to existing structures without addressing the deeper need to ‘regender’ these institutions,<sup>14</sup> which would enable women to participate fully and provide diverse perspectives. Based on interviews with civil servants, Wright’s study of the UK national security community demonstrates driving diversity as a means to achieve institutional change in mindset is hampered without considering structural power constraints.<sup>15</sup> To regender an institution means to take such structural power constraints seriously; to reshape its structures, policies, and culture to challenge and transform existing gender dynamics.

This process goes beyond simply increasing representation; it involves rethinking how gender influences power, decision-making, and organisational norms. Regendering can take many forms, such as implementing policies that promote gender equity in leadership, revising recruitment and promotion practices to eliminate biases, and fostering a workplace culture that values diverse perspectives. It also includes addressing structural barriers that limit opportunities for certain groups and ensuring that contributions from all genders are recognised and valued. In traditionally male-dominated institutions, such as the military or security sector, regendering might involve redefining combat roles, integrating women into leadership positions, and challenging the deeply embedded gendered assumptions that shape operational strategies and decision-making. Ultimately, regendering seeks to create institutions that are not just more inclusive, but also more effective and representative of the societies they serve. It is therefore essential to consider how to better incorporate women in decision-making to fully leverage the benefits of gender diversity.

In security and defence institutions, valuing diverse perspectives and approaches to leadership has specific challenges. This is because “military culture celebrates the group or collective over the individual and values uniformity over diversity, an essential condition as members must be substitutable in the realm of war”.<sup>16</sup> Like other institutions, defence and the military consists of both formal and informal rules and norms. While formally women are fully integrated with all positions open to them, there remain informal barriers, including the role of both explicit and implicit perceptions of women’s roles, as previously discussed.

Of relevance here is Wright and Turner’s<sup>17</sup> pilot study, which involved observing Army Officer Cadets taking part in their annual deployment exercise during a challenging crisis decision-making simulation in which there was no ‘right’ solution. The focus was on observing inter-group gender dynamics. All four groups reported high levels of trust in

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<sup>14</sup> C. Duncanson and R. Woodward, ‘Regendering the Military: Theorizing Women’s Military Participation’, *Security Dialogue* 47, no. 1 (2016): 3–21.

<sup>15</sup> Hannah Wright, ‘Diversity of Thought as “Mission Critical”: Knowledge, Politics and Power in UK National Security Policymaking’, *Security Dialogue*, 20 December 2024, 09670106241262855, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09670106241262855>.

<sup>16</sup> Erwin, ‘The Complex Relationship between Leadership and Gendered Experiences’.

<sup>17</sup> K.A.M. Wright and Catherine Turner, ‘Report for NUOTC and NUMEC on the NUOTC’s Annual Deployment Exercise, Ex NORTHERN HIGHLANDER’, 2024.

each other, but their observations suggested this trust was not fully evident in practice. In some groups, it was clear that not everyone was fully engaged in the exercise, with some participants showing frustration through body language and side comments. Notably, women tended to contribute less frequently than men, often speaking only when necessary. Both female and male officer cadets became aware of their behaviours during the session. Some men realised that their habit of dominating conversations, even under the guise of 'banter', limited others' participation, particularly women, and made them feel uncomfortable. This behaviour ultimately hindered group decision-making.

The literature indicates that there is limited scope to change individual beliefs (sexism or biases), but rather the emphasis should be on creating the institutional structures which limit or prevent these from being expressed and acted on. Of significant note here is Hardt and von Hlatky's<sup>18</sup> findings, which indicate that soldiers' positive appraisal of mixed-gender units was not based on beliefs about gender equality and the importance of diversity, but rather based on a perception that women provide added value. This is further supported by Karpowitz et al's<sup>19</sup> multi-year study of gender, leadership, and decision-making, which demonstrated that while different team dynamics—for example, more women, women in leadership positions—impacted the outcome in terms of women's influence positively, "the beliefs [of individuals] themselves do not change". In other words, they were not able to address bias, only limit how it was acted on, through the inclusion of women in leadership and through more significant numbers. This suggests that pre-existing biases are difficult to change at an individual level. Rather than attempting to alter deeply ingrained attitudes, a more effective approach is to implement institutional structural changes that mitigate the impact of these biases on decision-making. Ensuring the inclusion of women in leadership and decision-making processes is a key strategy in this regard, helping to create more balanced and representative institutions. By focusing on structural solutions rather than individual attitudinal change, organisations can foster more equitable and effective decision-making environments.

## 3

### Challenges for women in leadership

As section 2 has demonstrated, the value of gender diversity, and specifically the inclusion of women, to effective decision-making can thus be found across a range of literature with relevant case studies for learning for defence. As discussed, even when women are included in leadership decision-making teams, there can be gendered barriers to their full and meaningful inclusion, and to ensuring gender diversity can be benefited from through inclusive decision-making. The report now turns to examine these challenges.

As Erwin notes, it is necessary to consider both the implications of representative and individual voices not being included in leadership decision-making. Representative voice is understood as "the presence or absence of women's voices in regard to policy and

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<sup>18</sup> Hardt and Von Hlatky, 'Local Engagement and U.S. Military Attitudes toward Gender Integration'.

<sup>19</sup> C F. Karpowitz et al., 'Strength in Numbers Gender Composition, Leadership, and Women's Influence in Teams', *The Journal of Political Economy* 132, no. 9 (2024): 3077–3114.

regulation development within the military”,<sup>20</sup> while individual voice is “the ability or perceived ability of an individual to express issues pertaining to gender while serving in the military”.<sup>21</sup> The inclusion of both types of voice – individual and representative - is essential to inclusive decision-making and to improve the opportunity for a diversity of perspectives to be accounted for. In this vein, it is also necessary to shift attention from “what women do” to ask instead “what specific actors do”,<sup>22</sup> accounting for both men and women’s role in ensuring a range of voices and perspectives are heard.

Despite the benefits of women in leadership positions, they face particular challenges to performing their roles as a result of gender bias. In her study of gender, leadership, and US military culture—drawing on interviews with 24 serving men and women personnel, across the services, with a range of seniority and reflecting racial diversity—Erwin notes the particular impact of gender bias within military settings meant that women often had “to prove themselves or justify their leadership position within the military itself and/or a particular military leadership setting”.<sup>23</sup>

### The impact of the ‘gender double bind’ on effective decision-making

The literature so far<sup>24</sup> has shown that women’s presence enhances decision-making processes and outcomes for security and defence. This section turns to understand how perceptions of women in leadership roles negatively impact women’s ability to be heard and to provide diverse perspectives which can prove beneficial. By examining these perceptions, we can gain insight into the challenges to realising the potential of gender diversity to improve the efficacy of decision-making.

A couple of studies have focused specifically on gender perceptions of leadership in a military context. Notably, Dunn<sup>25</sup> examined gendered differences in leadership styles within the Royal Navy, drawing on interviews of a gender-balanced sample of 27 mid-ranking officers. The study found consensus between men and women about how Royal Navy leadership is conceptualised. However, the study did identify that “both men and women are alert to and critical of, women perceived to be displaying overt stereotypical female behaviour, in particular, to gain personal advantage”. This was in line with a previous study of the Army.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Erwin, ‘The Complex Relationship between Leadership and Gendered Experiences’.

<sup>21</sup> Erwin.

<sup>22</sup> Sarah Childs and Mona Lena Krook, ‘Critical Mass Theory and Women’s Political Representation’, *Political Studies* 56, no. 3 (October 2008): 725–36, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00712.x>.

<sup>23</sup> Erwin, ‘The Complex Relationship between Leadership and Gendered Experiences’.

<sup>24</sup> Boyer et al., ‘Gender and Negotiation’; Wright and Turner, ‘Report for NUOTC and NUMEC on the NUOTC’s Annual Deployment Exercise, Ex NORTHERN HIGHLANDER’; Hardt and Von Hlatky, ‘Local Engagement and U.S. Military Attitudes toward Gender Integration’; McDermott and Cowden, ‘The Effects of Uncertainty and Sex in a Crisis Simulation Game’.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Dunn, ‘All at Sea – Gender and Leadership in Britain’s Royal Navy (RN)’, *Gender in Management: An International Journal* 30, no. 6 (3 August 2015): 434–56, <https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-11-2013-0133>.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Dunn, ‘British Army Leadership: Is It Gendered?’, ed. Adelina Broadbridge, *Women in Management Review* 22, no. 6 (28 August 2007): 468–81, <https://doi.org/10.1108/09649420710778709>.



This aligns with Mavin's research on women leaders, which finds that women engage in intra-gender micro-violence due to the masculine norms that dominate leadership spaces. These norms constrain their relationships with other women, fostering competition and tension rather than solidarity.<sup>27</sup> This draws attention to what is referred to as the 'gender double-bind', highlighting the seeming impossibility of being a woman in a masculine institution. In this logic, leadership qualities traditionally associated with assertiveness and authority are often interpreted differently depending on whether they are exhibited by men or women.<sup>28</sup>

The construction of gender categories, norms, and relations plays a foundational role in shaping institutions. Individuals who "do gender appropriately", by conforming to essentialised gender stereotypes, support these institutions by helping to sustain, reproduce, and legitimise structures rooted in sex categories.<sup>29</sup> When an individual fails to perform gender in accordance with these norms, accountability typically falls on the individual rather than the institution.

Unpacking this dynamic is a complex but essential task, as institutions co-constitute and perpetuate broader societal inequalities by reinforcing gender categories and norms.<sup>30</sup> Qualities characterised as power-seeking and agential are gendered as masculine. As a result, women who demonstrate these traits "too well" often face negative repercussions, with their behaviours framed as "bitter, quarrelsome, or selfish".<sup>31</sup> To be perceived as "doing gender well", women leaders must embody communal characteristics that are constructed outside of, and often in opposition to, traditional leadership roles<sup>32</sup> and those sometimes required in military environments. Traits commonly associated with women, such as communality, compassion, and empathy, are not aligned with common perceptions of effective leadership and fail to confer agency.

The impact of the gender double bind is pointed to in Grisoni and Beeby's<sup>33</sup> study, though they do not use this term. They found that gendered organisational structures significantly influence both individual and collective behaviour during team-based tasks. This highlights the importance of recognising that sense-making processes, how those who are making decisions decide what to prioritise and how, are themselves gendered. This means that implicit perceptions of men's and women's roles in line with the gender

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<sup>27</sup> Sharon Mavin, Gina Grandy, and Jannine Williams, 'Experiences of Women Elite Leaders Doing Gender: Intra-gender Micro-violence between Women', *British Journal of Management* 25, no. 3 (July 2014): 439–55, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.12057>.

<sup>28</sup> Madeline E Heilman et al., 'Penalties for Success: Reactions to Women Who Succeed at Male Gender-Typed Tasks.', *Journal of Applied Psychology* 89, no. 3 (June 2004): 416–27, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.89.3.416>.

<sup>29</sup> C. West and D. H. Zimmerman, 'Doing Gender', ed. R Ely, M Scully, and E Foldy, *Gender & Society* 1, no. 2 (June 1987): 125–51.

<sup>30</sup> Joan Acker, 'From Glass Ceiling to Inequality Regimes', *Sociologie Du Travail* 51, no. 2 (April 2009): 199–217, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soctra.2009.03.004>.

<sup>31</sup> Stephanie Schnurr, 'Surviving in a Man's World with a Sense of Humour: An Analysis of Women Leaders' Use of Humour at Work', *Leadership* 43, no. 3 (2008).

<sup>32</sup> Sharon Mavin, Patricia Bryans, and Rosie Cunningham, 'Fed-up with Blair's Babes, Gordon's Gals, Cameron's Cuties, Nick's Nymphets: Challenging Gendered Media Representations of Women Political Leaders', *Gender in Management: An International Journal* 25, no. 7 (2010): 550–69.

<sup>33</sup> Louise Grisoni and Mick Beeby, 'Leadership, Gender and Sense-making', *Gender, Work & Organization* 14, no. 3 (May 2007): 191–209, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2007.00339.x>.



double bind can negatively influence decision-making. As a result, it is crucial for men and women, and in particular those in leadership, to remain aware of the potential impact of gendered dynamics in meetings. Such dynamics, if not addressed, may inhibit the expression of feminine leadership styles, or 'power with', rather than more masculinised 'power over' approaches.

In security decision-making, institutional constraints play a significant role in shaping outcomes. Wright's<sup>34</sup> study highlights this by examining interviews with civil servants in the UK national security community. She finds that the decision-making process often limits alternative options, leading to similar outcomes. Wright explains that

*“although securocrats are expected to bring their experiences as gendered, racialized, and classed subjects to the table when suggesting policy options, the process of selecting from those options is framed as one of objectively sorting through ideas, accepting or rejecting them based on a neutral, disinterested process. Prior recognition of the securocrat’s knowledge as situated is seemingly put back under the table, quietly reinstating the idea that policymaking requires a view from nowhere.”*

In other words, while policymakers may acknowledge personal experiences in shaping ideas, the final decision-making is presented as neutral, effectively sidelining those perspectives and reinforcing the idea that policy should come from an 'objective' standpoint.

In settings beyond security and defence where gender diversity can be acted upon because of the different power structures at play, its value is demonstrable. In a study examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the hospitality sector, Ledi et al found “that gender diversity acts as a catalyst for unlocking the full potential of strategic thinking to drive innovation, navigate crises effectively, and maintain resilience”. Although focused outside of a defence setting, the findings are relevant given the similar demands of high-stakes environments.<sup>35</sup>

Karpowitz et al's study<sup>36</sup> provides further critical insight into how women can be heard in team settings, demonstrating that there is need to think beyond just women's representation to consider how they are represented. Crucially, how many women are there, and who is leading the decision-making? To do so they examined the effect of team gender composition and leadership on women's influence through two field experiments. The first experiment found “that male-majority teams accord disproportionately less influence to women and are less likely to choose women to represent the team externally”. In comparison, teams led by women “substantially increase women's influence, even in male-majority teams”. The findings demonstrate that either increasing women's representation within the team or appointing a woman as team leader reduces the penalty women face by over 50 per cent.

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<sup>34</sup> Wright, 'Diversity of Thought as "Mission Critical"'.

<sup>35</sup> Klenam Korbla Ledi et al., 'All Hands on the Pump: The Role of Strategic Thinking and Gender Diversity on Crisis Management', *Current Issues in Tourism* 27, no. 17 (September 2024): 2709–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2024.2320428>.

<sup>36</sup> Karpowitz et al., 'Strength in Numbers Gender Composition, Leadership, and Women's Influence in Teams'.

Two elements are worth drawing out further here. First, the study demonstrates that

*“group gender composition is causally related to who is perceived as influential and capable of representing the group. This disadvantage is specific to women - men in the numerical minority do not experience it.”*

Second, the multi-year study allows them to demonstrate that

*“repeated interactions over time may sometimes ameliorate gendered influence deficits and that the behavior of both men and women contributes to women’s lesser influence in male-majority teams.”*

### Women and state leadership in crisis

The role of gender in crisis leadership has been subject to a number of studies, with research highlighting how perceptions of women in positions of power (as head of state or government) influence security decision-making. This section examines two key studies that explore the impact of gendered biases on female leaders during international disputes.

First, Post and Sen’s<sup>37</sup> study explores the impact of gendered perceptions of female leaders of states during militarised disputes. They drew on the Correlates of War project’s Militarized Interstate Dispute data set to test their hypothesis. The findings highlight the significance of gender stereotypes and cognitive biases in shaping security decision-making processes. Specifically, the research demonstrates that during international crises, governments are more likely to invoke gender stereotypes when responding to perceived threats from women leaders. They “find evidence of gender biases in bargaining interactions: Female-led states are more likely to have their disputes reciprocated and are consequently more likely to forcefully escalate a dispute than male-led governments”. In other words, the findings indicate that female-led states are more likely to face reciprocation in disputes, meaning their adversaries are more likely to respond aggressively. As a result, women leaders are more likely to escalate conflicts forcefully compared to their male counterparts.

Schwartz and Blair provide further nuance to these findings. Their study drew on experimental data, given co-occurrences of war and women’s leadership in international politics are historically rare. They identify that perceptions matter, noting that both male and female leaders facing female opponents in international politics “pay greater inconsistency costs for backing down from threats than male leaders do against fellow men”.<sup>38</sup> This means female leaders are held to a higher standard of consistency and may face greater criticism or consequences for changing their stance. While women leaders are better able to ‘tie hands’—where a leader deliberately limits their own options or flexibility to make their commitments more credible, and therefore establish credibility in crisis—they also have a resulting disadvantage, with it being harder for them to back down from threats, risking escalation to conflict.

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<sup>37</sup> Post, Abigail S. and Paromita Sen, ‘Why Can’t a Woman Be More like a Man? Female Leaders in Crisis Bargaining’, *International Interactions* 46, no. 1 (2 January 2020): 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2019.1683008>.

<sup>38</sup> Schwartz, Joshua A. and Christopher W. Blair, ‘Do Women Make More Credible Threats? Gender Stereotypes, Audience Costs, and Crisis Bargaining’, *International Organization* 74, no. 4 (2020): 872–95, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000223>.

Another important study is by Wilson,<sup>39</sup> who examines how New Zealand's former prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, led during two major crises: the Christchurch terror attacks and the COVID-19 pandemic. Wilson looks at how Ardern's leadership, marked by empathy, inclusivity, and clear communication, challenges traditional crisis leadership, which is often shaped by more authoritative and masculine styles. Using a case study approach, Wilson closely analyses Ardern's decisions and communication throughout these crises. The study highlights how Ardern's leadership focused on emotional intelligence, care, and collective well-being, rather than the tough, militaristic responses often associated with male leaders. Her approach shows that effective leadership in times of crisis does not have to rely on displays of strength and authority but can instead be built on compassion, reassurance, and engaging with the community. In addition, her attention to detail, combined with her engagement with a broad spectrum of experts and diverse perspectives, was evident. By addressing policy, scientific, and practical issues, she clearly communicated her approach. This openness, transparency, and deep knowledge were critical in decision-making during the crisis and played a key role in navigating the situation effectively.

## 4

### Conclusions

The research presented here demonstrates that diverse teams are more likely to challenge assumptions, mitigate groupthink, and adopt a broader range of perspectives when assessing risks and opportunities and has applicability to security decision-making. Gender-diverse teams improve communication, promote more inclusive problem-solving, and help de-escalate conflicts before they reach crisis points. However, there are particular challenges to being able to act on that diversity, particularly given the nature of decision-making processes in national security settings, where 'objective' knowledge and decision-making is prioritised over more situated input.

Crucially, the studies identified here on crisis decision-making simulations have shown that all-male groups are more prone to escalation and conflict, while mixed-gender groups tend to be more communicative and collaborative, fostering conciliation rather than conflict as an outcome. When women are in leadership positions, teams engage more, fostering a more inclusive and deliberate approach to security challenges.

In order to benefit from diversity in a security or defence setting, the literature suggests it is more effective to design decision-making processes that limit or prevent the expression of discriminatory beliefs, rather than attempting to change these beliefs directly. This includes prioritising women in leadership roles, as this can significantly reduce gender penalties given gender composition and leadership significantly positively affect women's influence within decision-making.

Ultimately, it is better that more conciliatory decisions are forged in dialogue, not in echo chambers. Inclusive decision-making is not just progressive, it is pragmatic because

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<sup>39</sup> Wilson, Suze, 'Cometh the Hour, Cometh the Woman: Jacinda Ardern's Crisis Leadership and Issues of Gender', *Political Science*, 26 December 2024, 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00323187.2024.2440328>.

when diversity is brought to the table, it is possible to strengthen the capacity to anticipate, adapt, and act decisively.

There is also a need to underscore the complex interplay between gender diversity and leadership in international crises which impacts security decision-making at the level of head of state and government, notably the significant role of stereotypes and cognitive biases. Studies by Post and Sen, as well as Schwartz and Blair, demonstrate that female state leaders face distinct challenges in militarised disputes. Governments are more likely to invoke gender stereotypes when responding to women leaders, leading to a higher likelihood of dispute reciprocation and forced escalation. Additionally, female leaders are held to stricter standards of consistency, making it more difficult for them to back down from threats without political consequences. While they may leverage credibility through strategic commitments, this advantage can also heighten the risk of conflict escalation. However, these findings should not be misinterpreted as an argument against the value of women in security decision-making. Rather, they highlight the need to challenge gender biases that shape crisis responses and to ensure that women leaders are not unfairly constrained by stereotypes. Greater inclusion of women in leadership and security roles remains essential for fostering diverse perspectives and more effective decision-making during international crises.

### Future research

The literature review has also highlighted the need for further research on gender diversity in security decision-making. This research should focus on understanding how women's voices can be effectively heard in security and defence decision-making processes, to gain the full benefit of gender diversity; for example, through the practice of inclusive leadership. It should also examine the impact of intersectionality, examining how race, class, and other factors interact with gender in security decision-making settings, as well as the the long-term impact of gender-diverse leadership on security decision-making. Key to the above would be enabling studies that go beyond simulations to analyse real-world decision-making processes in security contexts.

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