Introduction for Professor Gerard J. DeGroot

Professor DeGroot is head of the Department of Modern History at the University of St Andrews, where he has worked for the last 17 years. He has published eight books, which deal with various aspects of war, particularly the effects of war upon society. His latest book, entitled A Soldier and a Woman, is an edited collection of articles, which examine the experiences of women in the military around the world since the 16th century. As a result of his expertise on women in the military, he was asked to join a UN-sponsored conference of experts who met in Uppsala in June 1999, with the aim of providing guidance to the UN on mainstreaming gender in peacekeeping operations. On the strength of that conference, the group met again at Windhoek, Namibia in June 2000. Intensive discussions and negotiations led to agreement on the Windhoek Declaration, which called upon the United Nations to take more active steps to "mainstream" gender issues in the conduct of its operations. This led in turn to United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, agreed on 1 October 2000. Members of this group met in Oslo last year to try to formulate proactive policies for international agencies to adopt in the implementation of the UN Resolution. At that conference, DeGroot offered advice on ways to increase the number of women in peacekeeping forces, an important step in making those forces more gender sensitive.

Professor DeGroot has agreed to come and talk at the Committee on Women in the NATO Forces Annual Conference 2002 on what he calls "A Few Good Women": Gender Stereotypes and their Implications for Peacekeeping.

During the United Nations operation in Somalia, UN peacekeepers frequently raped local women who ventured outside the refugee camps to collect firewood. The UN could not discipline the soldiers since it had little authority over them and was concerned about causing insult to the countries from which they came. It instead decided to provide the women with stoves that did not burn wood. At another camp, a fast growing plant noted for its razor sharp thorns was grown around the camp perimeter, to deter marauding peacekeepers. These practical solutions did not remove the source of the rape problem, but they did alleviate its effects.

I mention these incidents because they illustrate the characteristic pragmatism of peacekeeping as it is conducted by the UN. It is a good thing for an academic occasionally to spend time with pragmatic people interested in solutions more than in theories. Three years ago, I attended a conference at Uppsala University which was organised to advise the UN in the task of mainstreaming gender in its peacekeeping operations. The conference had a dual aim: to explore whether a greater proportion of women in peacekeeping operations might improve their chances of success, and to raise awareness of the needs of women in the host countries to which peacekeepers are sent. UN officials, soldiers, NGOs and academics like myself wrestled with these problems for two days. On the strength of that conference, the group met again at Windhoek, Namibia in June 2000. Intensive discussions and negotiations led to agreement on the Windhoek Declaration, which called upon the United Nations to take more active steps to "mainstream" gender issues in the conduct of its operations. This led in turn to UN Security Council Resolution 1325, agreed on 1 October 2000. The resolution recognises "that an understanding of the impact of armed conflict on women and girls ... can significantly contribute to the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security." The resolution itself is an interesting comment on the process of negotiation within the United Nations. While it was relatively easy to garner agreement on a resolution which recognises the need to take account of the impact of war on the female population, as yet little progress has been made on the other aspect of our work, namely the need for women to play a larger role in peacekeeping and peace support operations.

I'm speaking to you today not as an expert on peacekeeping but as a representative of that UN process, and indeed as a historian of women in war. The issues raised at Uppsala, Windhoek and last year in Oslo deserve wider discussion, and for that reason I am delighted that you have invited me here today.

Dag Hammarskjöld, the Nobel Peace Prize winner and second Secretary General of the United Nations, once said that "peacekeeping is too important to be undertaken by soldiers". But, he added, 'soldiers are the only ones who can do it'. Because peacekeeping can be violent, combat training is essential. But the peacekeeper must also be conciliatory and patient. Few conventionally trained male military personnel combine the qualities of soldier and social worker essential to the job. As a result, United Nations (UN) operations have been marred by aggressive behaviour that exacerbates tensions.

The contradictions between peacekeeping and conventional soldiering are profound. In most militaries, training accentuates stereotypical male characteristics. The recruit is encouraged to develop strength and aggression, while ridding himself of stereotypical female attributes like sensitivity and compassion. The well-trained soldier is hungry for battle because it is in battle that he asserts his dominance. Yet the peacekeeper is supposed to keep aggression in check and to pursue the path of conciliation. In peacekeeping, violence signifies failure.

Central to this issue is whether men are inherently more violent than women. Circumstantial evidence suggests that they are. The vast majority of violent crimes are committed by men. Barroom brawls and soccer riots seldom
include women. In the past, military training has attempted to develop and channel this male capacity for violence. But controlling it has proved enormously difficult. Soldiers win wars, but they also occasionally commit atrocities when aggression rages out of control, as the behaviour of the Canadian airborne regiment in Somalia demonstrates. Ritualized male behaviour, itself not unusual in a war context, led to instances of torture of the civilian population. The scandal rocked the Canadian military and government, eventually leading to the disbandment of the airborne regiment.

The problem of uncontrolled violence also affects conventional military operations. In Vietnam, for instance, nearly ten thousand American soldiers died as a result of accidents or what is called 'friendly fire'. In many cases these fatalities occurred when violence raged out of control or the impulse toward bravery turned into sheer stupidity. Yet most militaries have decided that it is best to encourage blind aggression and bravery rather than run the risk of a soldier who second guesses himself. The atrocities and avoidable losses, it seems, are an acceptable cost of an effective fighting machine.

The Russian experience demonstrates that women can be trained to be aggressive. But the operative word is 'trained'. Women, it seems, are not usually inclined toward violence. When they are violent, they tend to use their violence in a purposeful fashion, for instance to protect themselves or their children. Their aggression seldom rages out of control. Whether this behaviour is the result of social conditioning or biological determinism remains a matter for intense dispute. Whatever the explanation, this pragmatic, highly controlled violence exhibited by women has applications in the modern military context. If women can be trained to exercise aggression, they can presumably also be trained to control their aggression - perhaps more effectively than men.

In other words, the gender-based argument relating to the role of women in the military might have been rendered moot by the circumstances of peacekeeping operations. Proponents of sexual integration in the military have long argued that women are essentially the same as men and can therefore perform adequately in a combat situation. The peacekeeping issue turns this argument on its head. Women, it seems, might be valuable to peacekeeping operations because they are different.

In a crisis, men and women, for whatever reason, seem to act differently. Men sometimes jeopardise operations because they act like stereotypical men. If women tend to act more peaceful and are prone to seek conciliation, then they might be of value to the peacekeeping situation. Essential to this issue is the question of perception. In other words, the way peacekeepers behave is important, but so too is the way they are expected to behave by the local population. Thus, the presence of a man in a tense situation can be provocative, even if that man has no intention to provoke. On the other hand, the woman tends to calm stressful situations because she is expected to be peaceful. Various studies have, for instance, shown that men react differently to confrontations with male and female police officers. The female officer tends to calm an aggressive male, while the male officer challenges him. The situation often escalates into a contest of male dominance.

Male violence might not be instinctive. Instead of men being controlled by the testosterone coursing through their veins, perhaps they are more accurately the slaves of cultural conditioning. If military training can teach women to be aggressive, it might also be able to teach men to be more peaceful and controlled. The problem with male peacekeepers on UN operations is that they often lack the training for the function they are called upon to perform. In other words, disasters are understandable if the UN persists in throwing combat soldiers into unfamiliar peacekeeping situations. To date, the Scandinavian countries are among the few nations in which soldiers are given intensive training in peace support. Canada has also made great strides in this direction -- a somewhat ironic fact given that some of the worst atrocities on recent UN operations were committed by Canadian personnel.

The problem is not just one of training but also recruitment. Young men join the military often because they are attracted to the prospect of combat. For these men, being assigned to a peacekeeping operation where they are not expected to fight is an insult to their manhood. In those countries where participation in these operations is voluntary (in particular for officers), it is sometimes difficult to get men to volunteer. This is somewhat strange since, in Western countries, peacekeeping operations are currently a great deal more likely to occur than conventional military operations. Clearly what is needed is a redefinition of the purpose of the military. Such a redefinition seems to be occurring, if one ad campaign for the British Army is an accurate indication. Designed by one of the world’s leading advertisement agencies, Saatchi and Saatchi, the ads in question have specifically focused upon non-traditional deployments of the military and have given special attention to the role of women. But the UN’s dilemma goes beyond the problem of appropriate training or recruitment. Male soldiers are also prone to sexual violence against civilians. No army is immune to this problem, as recent experience in Bosnia and Somalia has shown. Rape is a weapon of war. Some 20,000 women were raped in Nanking in 1937, 110,000 in Berlin in 1945, and perhaps as many as 50,000 in Bosnia recently. Rape allows the soldier to deface the culture of his opponent by, in effect, colonizing the bodies of its female citizens. Rape by soldiers remains high even in times of peace. Thus, within the American military community on Okinawa, its incidence was three times higher than in a similarly sized group at home.

This sort of behaviour has marred UN peacekeeping operations, as the experience from Somalia demonstrates. Equally worrying is the rise of prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases when the UN is present. During the Cambodia peacekeeping operation, the number of prostitutes in Phnom Penh increased from 6,000 to 20,000 while the UN was present, and one participant country found that 25 percent of its soldiers were HIV-positive on their return home.

The UN has, until recently, been a male-dominated organization, rather like the military. As late as 1994 women
occupied only 13 percent of decision making positions within the UN Secretariat. In the Department of Peacekeeping Operations they constituted just four percent. It is no wonder, then, that at the point where the functions of the UN and of the military intersect, namely on the ground in the world's crisis spots, women have largely been absent. Between 1989 and 1993, just 1.7 per cent of military peacekeepers deployed by the UN were female.

Yet in almost any conflict 80 per cent of the refugees are women and children. In addition to the problems of rape and prostitution mentioned above, the preponderance of males causes practical difficulties. In many cultures, women are virtually prohibited by social convention from talking directly to male strangers. Yet communication is essential to effective peacekeeping. In Somalia, for example, male soldiers had to frisk local women for weapons. While these searches were necessary, they violated social conventions about men touching women. Nor did it help that they were carried out, according to one official report, in a 'rough, intrusive and humiliating manner'.

In Somalia, a marked difference in behaviour was apparent between combat and support units of the US Army. According to a 1995 article in Armed Forces and Society, support groups exhibited a strong inclination to understand the problems facing the host society, while combat groups quickly developed a hostile attitude, particularly when the political situation deteriorated. A desire to apply force, even for mild offences, and to assert dominance was evident. It is perhaps no surprise that the combat groups contained no women.

The support groups were still predominantly male. This raises an interesting point, namely that female participation does not have to be large to have a positive effect. In other words, male soldiers are less inclined to assert their dominance if female soldiers are present. Women seem to calm stressful situations. In addition, a 1995 study for the UN Division for the Advancement of Women found that the incidence of rape and prostitution falls significantly with just a token female presence. Stated simply, men behave when in the presence of women from their own culture.

The most notable UN successes of late – in Guatemala and South Africa, for instance – had a greater-than-normal female presence. In both operations, the proportion of females was just under 50 percent. In the notorious Cambodian operation, on the other hand, no women were present. There is no evidence that women make better peacekeepers, but a great deal of evidence to suggest that the presence of women improves an operation’s chances of success. A better gender balance means that the operation more closely resembles civilian society. Its members are therefore more likely to observe social conventions that define civilized behaviour.

There are, of course, problems with deploying a more gender-balanced force. As one official recently admitted, ‘though the UN should be pushing for more women, we’re begging, borrowing and stealing to get any troops at all’. There are only a few states able to provide appropriately trained women, among them Canada, the US and most European countries. The UN cannot, however, afford to have its operations dominated by Western militaries. But even in Canada, where the percentage of women in the forces is around 12 percent, their level of participation in peacekeeping units has consistently been lower than that figure because combat units (in which gender integration is least profound) are usually sent.

One of the previously mentioned British Army recruitment ads shows a woman cowering in the corner of a bombed building. As the film runs, a caption reads: ‘She’s just been raped by soldiers. The same soldiers murdered her husband. The last thing she wants to see is another soldier. Unless that soldier is a woman’. The advertisement plays upon gender stereotypes that have many feminists tearing their hair. Indeed, the recent integration of women into combat in many Western militaries has been based on the assumption that stereotypes have no validity, that women can be turned into ruthless killers. But peacekeeping is a practical problem in which gender theory has little place. If women are, for whatever reason, calmer and more conciliatory than men, then they have an important role to play. The UN, in other words, is quite keen that its female warriors should remain ‘womanly’.