

Gender, Numbers, and Norms: Rethinking Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment (SEAH) Accountability in Nepal's UN Peacekeeping Role

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Abstract

Between 2023 and early 2025, Nepal became the top contributor of uniformed personnel to UN peacekeeping missions, deploying more than 6,000 troops and police at its peak and surpassing other major contributors such as Rwanda, Bangladesh, and India (The Kathmandu Post, 2024a; UNDPO, 2025c). Along with this numerical growth, Nepal has also increased the participation of women peacekeepers, who now make up nearly 10 percent of its deployed personnel (Nepalnews, 2025a). However, a UN-wide funding crisis has since driven peacekeeping budgets and troop quotas down by up to 25 percent, pushing global peacekeeper numbers to their lowest level in at least 25 years by the end of 2025 and allowing Uganda to overtake Nepal at the top of the contributor rankings in early 2026 (SIPRI, 2026). Even so, Nepal remains among the handful of leading troop- and police-contributing countries (T/PCCs). Meanwhile, worldwide, the rise in women's involvement in peace operations has been accompanied by ongoing reports of Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment (SEAH) targeting both host communities and women within UN missions (Donnelly et al., 2022). In response, the UN has adopted a "zero-tolerance" policy and established the Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. This fund is financed through voluntary contributions from Member States and reimbursements withheld from T/PCCs, though independent oversight reviews have recently questioned how effectively those funds reach survivors (United Nations, n.d.; Certioraris, 2025).

This article situates Nepal's peacekeeping role within ongoing global discussions. Drawing on UN data, policy documents, and recent scholarship, it examines (a) Nepal's rise as the leading contributor to UN peacekeeping; (b) patterns and challenges in women's participation in Nepali contingents; (c) the extent and nature of SEAH in peace operations, with a focus on women peacekeepers; and (d) the normative and institutional responses, including the Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (TFSVSEA). It argues that Nepal's key role in UN peacekeeping presents both opportunities and responsibilities: promoting gender-responsive peacekeeping, strengthening national and mission-level safeguards against SEAH, and aligning policies, training, and accountability measures with the UN's victim-centered approach. The article concludes with recommendations for Nepal's security agencies, the UN, and academic research on peacekeeping and gender justice.

Keywords: UN peacekeeping, women peacekeepers, sexual exploitation and abuse, sexual harassment, Trust Fund in Support of Victims, gender, security sector reform.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, peacekeeping has changed significantly because of budget cuts, complex conflicts, and increased scrutiny of peacekeeper misconduct (Relief Web, n.d.). At the same time, the UN has advanced a strong agenda on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) and gender parity in peace operations, seeking to increase women's representation and leadership in both civilian and military positions (United Nations Peacekeeping, n.d.). In this evolving environment, Nepal has emerged as a central actor.

According to data from the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO) and reports from national and international media, Nepal had become the top troop contributor to UN peacekeeping by late 2023, with approximately 6,247 military and police personnel participating in various missions (The Kathmandu Post, 2024a; 2024b). A 2024 global contributors report ranked Nepal first, with 6,110 peacekeepers (including 5,458 men and 652 women), surpassing countries such as India, Rwanda, and Bangladesh (UNDPO, 2024). Nepal held that top position into March 2025, with 6,124 personnel, including 600 women (UNDPO, 2025c). Since mid-2025, however, a severe UN funding shortfall, driven in part by delayed or withheld contributions from major donors, including the United States, which has moved to defund several UN bodies, has forced budget cuts of up to 25 percent across peacekeeping operations. By the end of 2025, the total number of deployed peacekeepers worldwide had fallen to about 78,600, its lowest level in at least 25 years and 49 percent below 2016 levels (SIPRI, 2026). Nepal's deployment fell to roughly 5,800 personnel across ten missions by October 2025 (OnlineKhabar, 2025; Nepalnews, 2025a), and Uganda edged past it to claim the top spot by early 2026, with Nepal, Bangladesh, and India—all Global South nations—still ranked among the ten largest contributors (SIPRI, 2026). For a small, landlocked country with limited hard power, this peacekeeping role has remained vital to its foreign policy, defense diplomacy, and international standing, even as volatile UN financing now shapes how sustainable that role can be.

This quantitative achievement aligns with another important goal: ensuring women have meaningful roles in peacekeeping. By October 2025, Nepal had 538 women among its 5,819 deployed peacekeepers, close to 10 percent of the total. More than 2,700 Nepali women have taken part in peace operations since 1958 (Nepalnews, 2025a; HimalPress, 2024). Nepal has also consistently ranked as the leading contributor of women peacekeepers in absolute terms, ahead of Rwanda, Bangladesh, and Ghana (HimalPress, 2024). Nevertheless, women peacekeepers worldwide and within missions still face male-dominated institutional cultures, gender-based obstacles to promotion and deployment, and, in some cases, sexual harassment and abuse by colleagues or other mission personnel (Donnelly & Mazurana, 2025).

Alongside efforts to increase women's participation, the UN continues to face allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by peacekeepers against local populations. A 2024 UN report recorded 102 allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation in UN peacekeeping and political missions, identifying 125 victims, primarily women and girls; two missions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic accounted for 82 percent of these cases (AP News, 2025). The Secretary-General's most recent report, covering 2025 and released in February 2026, broadened its scope to capture allegations across the wider UN system, recording 568 allegations system-wide—a reminder that, despite tightened reporting mechanisms, misconduct remains a persistent, system-wide problem rather than one confined to peacekeeping missions alone (United Nations, 2026). This has sparked intense debate over accountability, state responsibility, and the ethics of peacekeeping.

This article proceeds from the premise that Nepal, as the leading troop contributor and an increasing provider of women peacekeepers, must critically address SEAH issues both internationally and in its own deployments. It asks:

1. How has Nepal's involvement in UN peacekeeping evolved, and what is its current status regarding troop contributions and gender representation?
2. How do global trends in women's participation and SEAH issues in peacekeeping missions affect the risks and opportunities faced by Nepali women peacekeepers?
3. What is the importance of the UN's Trust Fund for Supporting Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, and how does it relate to the obligations of troop- and police-contributing countries like Nepal?
4. What policy, legal, and institutional reforms are necessary in Nepal and in UN missions to promote gender-responsive and victim-focused peacekeeping?

The article relies on a qualitative review of UN policy documents, official statistics, the Trust Fund's annual reports, and recent academic literature on gender and peacekeeping. It also draws on publicly available data on Nepal's contributions.

1.1 Methods Note: Use of Legal and Policy Sources

This article presents a qualitative document analysis of international, national, and institutional legal and policy sources to examine Nepal's involvement in gender-responsive peacekeeping and its obligations regarding sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment (SEAH). Primary sources include United Nations policy documents, peacekeeping data, annual reports, and Nepal's constitutional provisions, criminal laws, security sector legislation, and National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security. These legal and policy texts are treated not merely as descriptive but as normative tools that shape institutional behavior, accountability systems, and the country's peacekeeping responsibilities. Following standard methods in peacekeeping and security research, these sources are cross-verified with scholarly literature and credible investigative reports to assess both official commitments and actual practice. This methodology enables an examination of how international norms on gender and SEAH are internalized, operationalized, or contested within Nepal's peacekeeping efforts.

2. Nepal's Changing Role in UN Peacekeeping

2.1 Historical trajectory

Nepal began its involvement in UN peacekeeping in the late 1950s. The Nepal Army initially sent military observers to the UN Observer Group in Lebanon in 1958, shortly after Nepal became a member of the United Nations (The Kathmandu Post, 2024a). Since then, Nepali troops have participated in more than forty UN missions across Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and the Balkans. These include significant deployments such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo - United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission (MONUSCO); South Sudan - United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS); the Central African Republic - United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSCA); Lebanon - United Nations Interim Force (UNIFIL); and others (The Kathmandu Post, 2024a).

By October 2025, the Nepal Army reported that 159,664 Nepali peacekeepers had participated in UN missions since 1958. This figure includes personnel from the Army, Armed Police Force, and Nepal Police. The Nepal Army also reported that 74 peacekeepers had died and 75 were seriously injured during their service (People's Review, 2025). Peacekeeping has become a core part of Nepal's military identity, providing vital professional training, international exposure, and economic benefits for soldiers.

2.2 Becoming the top uniformed personnel contributor

Recent UN data and independent reports indicate that from late 2023 through early 2025, Nepal was the top contributor of UN peacekeeping personnel, including military contingents, formed police units, and individual officers (The Kathmandu Post, 2024a; 2024b; UNDPO, 2025c). As of 30 November 2023, Nepal deployed 6,247 personnel, surpassing Bangladesh (6,197), India (approximately 6,073), and Rwanda (5,919) (The Kathmandu Post, 2024a). A 2024 global ranking of contributing countries also placed Nepal at the top, with 6,110 peacekeepers, including 652 women (UNDPO, 2024). Nepal still led as of March 2025, with 6,124 personnel, including 600 women, ahead of Rwanda (5,891), Bangladesh (5,675), and India (5,365) (UNDPO, 2025c). This lead proved fragile: a UN liquidity crisis forced across-the-board cuts of up to 25 percent to peacekeeping quotas through 2025–2026. By early 2026, Uganda (4,657 troops) had overtaken Nepal. Nepal, Bangladesh, and India each still fielded more than 4,000 troops among the ten largest contributors, all of them Global South states (SIPRI, 2026). Nepal's numbers fell to about 5,819 personnel, including 538 women, across ten missions by October 2025 (Nepalnews, 2025a). The episode illustrates a theme this article returns to in Section 7: that Nepal's peacekeeping standing is no longer secured by troop numbers alone and is increasingly contingent on the credibility, budget politics, and normative direction of the wider UN system, police units, and individual officers (The Kathmandu Post, 2024a; 2024b; UNDPO, 2025).

This prominent role is impressive given Nepal's relatively small population and limited economic resources. On a per capita basis, Nepal's contribution rate of more than 200 peacekeepers per million residents far exceeds that of many larger countries (UNDPO, 2024). Peacekeeping has, in turn, provided Nepal:

- **International visibility:** A means to promote international visibility and diplomatic goodwill.
- **Professionalization:** Opportunities for training and professional development for its security forces.
- **Financial flows:** Access to UN reimbursements that supplement national defense budgets; and
- **Normative participation:** A platform for engaging in global security governance despite limited traditional power (Institute of South Asian Studies [ISAS], 2024).

2.3 Institutional infrastructure: Training and coordination

To sustain this level of contribution, Nepal has established specialized training and institutional mechanisms, including the Birendra Peace Operations Training Centre in Panchkhal, which provides pre-deployment training for Nepali and international peacekeepers (The Kathmandu Post, 2024a). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, the Nepal Army, the Armed Police Force, and the Nepal Police work together to coordinate peacekeeping deployments and engage with the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO).

The same institutional infrastructure can and arguably must serve as a platform for integrating gender issues and fighting SEAH through:

- Pre-deployment training on UN standards of conduct, human rights, and gender equality.
- Including UN Security Council resolutions on Women, Peace, and Security in training curricula; and
- Collaboration with the UN and civil society partners to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) (United Nations in Nepal, 2023).

3. Women, Gender, and Nepali Peacekeepers

3.1 Global patterns of women's participation

Women have historically been underrepresented in peacekeeping worldwide, especially in military contingents. In 1993, women made up about 1 percent of uniformed personnel in UN missions. By 2022, this had increased to 7.9 percent of all military, police, justice, and corrections personnel in peacekeeping operations (UNDPO, 2022). More recent figures indicate that women account for about 7 percent of military peacekeepers, 16 percent of police serving in member-state-formed units, and 19 percent of individually deployed UN police officers (DCAF, 2024).

The UN's Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy sets phased targets for women's representation across categories and tracks progress with monthly gender statistics, working toward longer-term 2028 goals of 30 percent women in field missions and 35 percent at UN headquarters (DCAF, 2024). Interim 2024 targets called for 11 percent women in troop contingents and 21 percent women among military experts on mission and staff officers (UNDPO, 2025b). Although police units are nearing these targets, women remain significantly underrepresented in military contingents, particularly at senior ranks. Funding cuts and troop reductions since mid-2025 have added uncertainty about whether the 2028 targets remain achievable (UNDPO, 2025b; UN Women, 2025; SIPRI, 2026).

3.2 Women peacekeepers from Nepal

In this global context, Nepal has made significant but incomplete progress. By October 2025, the Nepal Army reported that more than 2,700 Nepali women had participated in UN peacekeeping missions since 1958, including 538 women (about 9 percent of the total deployment) serving at that time (Nepalnews, 2025a; HimalPress, 2024). These women serve as soldiers, staff officers, police officers, and members of formed police units, deployed to missions including MONUSCO, UNMISS, MINUSCA, UNIFIL, and others.

Nepal's relatively high proportion of women troops (about 9–10 percent) remains notably higher than the global average of roughly 7 percent for military contingents (DCAF, 2024). However, it still falls well short of the UN's 2028 Gender Parity Strategy targets of 30 percent women in field missions overall and 35 percent at headquarters (DCAF, 2024; UNDPO, 2025b). Obstacles to increased participation include:

- Gendered recruitment patterns in the Nepal Army and police;
- Cultural norms that restrict women's involvement in combat and overseas deployment.
- Concerns about family responsibilities and security risks;
- Limited number of women in senior ranks are eligible for staff and leadership positions.

3.3 Why women peacekeepers matter

Research and UN policy documents highlight several reasons why involving women in peacekeeping improves operational effectiveness, legitimacy, and protection outcomes. Women peacekeepers can better connect with communities, particularly women and children; increase reporting of gender-based violence; and serve as role models for local women's engagement in public life (UNDPO, 2022; UN Women, 2025). Additionally, diverse teams tend to make better decisions and build trust in fragile environments.

For Nepal, investing in women peacekeepers is not only about gender justice but also a strategic advantage. It strengthens Nepal's leadership in modern, rights-based peacekeeping and supports its commitments to United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1325 and related Women, Peace and Security (WPS) resolutions.

4. Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment in Peacekeeping Missions

4.1 SEA directed at host communities

The UN has long been criticized for sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) committed by peacekeepers targeting local populations, including rape, sexual assault, coercive transactional sex under coercive conditions, and the exploitation of minors (Human Rights Watch, 2016, 2017; United States Institute of Peace [USIP], 2018). These actions violate international human rights standards, host-state laws, and UN codes of conduct.

A 2024 UN General Assembly report noted that allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse in UN peacekeeping and political missions surpassed 100 for the third time in ten years. There were 102 allegations involving 125 victims, including 98 adults and 27 children. In most cases, 82% were linked to MONUSCO in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and MINUSCA in the Central African Republic. The Secretary-General's follow-up report, covering 2025 and issued in February 2026, expanded data collection to the entire UN system and recorded 568 allegations across all UN entities, agencies, and missions combined (United Nations, 2026). Although these figures reflect only reported incidents and are not directly comparable between the two reporting formats, they underscore the ongoing and systemic challenges associated with this issue.

4.2 Sexual Harassment and Abuse against Women Peacekeepers

Recent studies have broadened the scope of SEA from targeting local civilians to include sexual harassment and abuse directed at peacekeeping personnel, particularly women. Evidence indicates a pattern of "blue-on-blue" abuse, involving sexual harassment, coercion, and assault committed by male colleagues, superiors, or other mission staff against women peacekeepers (Donnelly & Mazurana, 2025; Westendorf & Dolan-Evans, 2025). This evidence indicates that:

- Women peacekeepers and aid workers report higher rates of sexual harassment and assault than their male counterparts.
- A significant number of women have witnessed sexual abuse of others in missions.
- Institutional responses tend to be weak, with under-reporting driven by fear of retaliation, career damage, and lack of trust in complaint mechanisms (Donnelly et al., 2022; Donnelly, 2025).

The UN and partners increasingly use the broader acronym SEAH (Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment) to capture this continuum of misconduct, both inside and outside missions (Donnelly & Mazurana, 2025). However, policy and data systems remain more advanced for SEA against host populations than for sexual harassment within mission workplaces.

4.3 Root causes and structural drivers

Literature on SEAH in peacekeeping highlights several structural drivers:

- Militarized masculinities and highly masculine organizational cultures.
- Significant power imbalances exist between troops and local populations, as well as among ranks within missions.
- Weak oversight, fragmented jurisdiction, and limited criminal accountability for peacekeepers.
- Economic vulnerabilities of host communities and unstable contract conditions for certain mission staff.

- Inadequate gender-sensitive training and a lack of women in leadership positions. (Human Rights Watch, 2016, 2017; USIP, 2018; Anania, 2020)

For a country like Nepal, whose troops operate within these broader mission environments, SEAH poses both a reputational risk and a human rights concern, regardless of the nationality of specific perpetrators.

5. The Trust Fund in Support of Victims of SEA

5.1 Establishment and mandate

In 2016, the UN established the Trust Fund to Support Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse to provide more coordinated assistance to victims of SEA by UN personnel (United Nations, 2016). The Fund is managed by the Department of Management Strategy, Policy, and Compliance (DMSPC) and is funded by:

- Voluntary contributions from Member States, and
- Withholding reimbursements from countries contributing troops and police in cases of verified SEA allegations (USIP, 2018; Anania, 2020).

The Fund supports projects that provide medical care, psychosocial support, legal aid, livelihood assistance, and community-based services for victims and children born of SEA (United Nations, 2024; Relief Web, n.d.).

5.2 Scale of contributions and projects

Initial reports showed modest contributions, but support from Member States has grown steadily. For instance, India was the first to donate to the Fund in 2016, contributing US\$100,000, thereby symbolically linking its status as a significant Troop Contributing Country (TCC) to its responsibility to support victims (The Tribune, 2016). A 2021-22 progress report across multiple sectors noted that 24 Member States had contributed more than US\$4.3 million, funding at least 16 projects in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, and South Sudan (GOV.UK, 2022). By its 2024 annual report, the Fund had received a cumulative US\$5.19 million from 25 Member States-US\$4.21 million in voluntary contributions and just under US\$1 million in reimbursements withheld from T/PCCs for verified SEA cases, and had funded 21 projects, supporting more than 4,300 survivors and children born of SEA since 2016, including 408 beneficiaries across four countries in 2024 alone (United Nations, 2025a, 2025b).

Annual reports for 2022-2024 illustrate the Trust Fund's support for multi-year, victim-centered projects and its collaboration with UN entities and NGOs to enhance complaint mechanisms and provide long-term support (United Nations, 2025a). Publicly available UN communications often do not list all contributing states by name in a single consolidated table, making it challenging to track individual country contributions systematically. Moreover, an October 2025 investigative review of internal UN oversight findings raised serious questions about implementation: it reported that a UN Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) audit of five Central African Republic projects—costing over US\$815,000 and meant to assist 628 survivors found arbitrary project selection, an implementing partner without office or staff capacity, and eleven of thirty-six progress reports stating simply "nothing to report," even as the Secretary-General's own reporting to Member States described the same projects as successfully implemented (Certioraris, 2025). This gap between official reporting and independent audit findings sharpens the overall trend: TCCs and donor states face increasing pressure not only to contribute financially but also to demand real transparency and accountability over how those contributions reach survivors. The overall trend is clear that TCCs and donor states face increasing pressure to align their rhetorical commitments with actual financial support for survivors.

5.3 Implications for countries sending troops

For countries like Nepal, the Trust Fund has three key implications:

- 1. Moral and political responsibility:** As a leading TCC, Nepal should take visible actions to support SEA victims, regardless of whether its personnel were involved, and align with the UN's victim-centered approach.
- 2. Financial incentives and sanctions:** The possibility of withholding reimbursements when SEA allegations are verified encourages TCCs to prevent misconduct and to prosecute perpetrators (USIP, 2018; Anania, 2020).
- 3. Norm diffusion:** Collaborating with the Fund and related UN frameworks to help domestic institutions adopt higher standards for gender equality, accountability, and victim support (United Nations, 2024).

6. Nepal's Policies and Practices on Gender and SEAH

6.1 National commitments and UN frameworks

Nepal has officially ratified key international agreements on women's rights and gender equality, including CEDAW and UNSC Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security. It has also developed national action plans for Resolutions 1325 and 1820 and implemented gender mainstreaming policies in the security sector to integrate gender perspectives into peacekeeping efforts (Government of Nepal, 2011; 2019).

At the country level in Nepal, UN agencies have focused on preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) by conducting workshops and integrating SEA prevention into broader cooperation strategies (United Nations Country Team Nepal, 2023). These initiatives establish a normative foundation to ensure that personnel deployed abroad uphold high standards of conduct.

6.1.1 Nepal-Specific Legal and Regulatory Frameworks Related to Gender and SEAH

Beyond its international obligations, Nepal's stance on gender equality and SEAH in peacekeeping is shaped by its domestic constitutional, legal, and institutional frameworks governing the conduct of its security forces.

Constitutional and Statutory Foundations

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) provides a fundamental legal foundation for gender equality and protection against sexual violence. Article 18 guarantees equality and explicitly prohibits sex-based discrimination, while Article 38 affirms women's rights, including safeguards against physical, mental, sexual, psychological, and other forms of violence. These constitutional provisions apply to all government institutions, including the Nepal Army, the Nepal Police, and the Armed Police Force, and impose a binding obligation on state officials to prevent sexual violence and discrimination, whether in Nepal or abroad.

Criminal accountability for sexual offenses is primarily governed by the National Penal Code, 2017 (Muluki Criminal Code), which criminalizes rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and abuse of authority for sexual purposes. These laws apply extraterritorially to Nepali citizens in certain cases, providing the legal foundation for prosecuting peacekeepers accused of sexual exploitation, abuse, or harassment while serving in UN missions.

Military and Police Legal Frameworks

The Army Act, 2006, and its regulations govern military personnel discipline and conduct. They set procedures for courts-martial and internal discipline for Nepal Army members, including those serving internationally.

Misconduct, such as actions that damage the institution's reputation or violate criminal laws, may result in disciplinary measures, dismissal, or referral to civilian courts, depending on the offense's severity.

Similarly, members of the Nepal Police and the Armed Police Force are governed by the Police Act, 1955, the Armed Police Force Act, 2001, and their respective rules and regulations. These legal frameworks authorize internal disciplinary bodies to investigate misconduct and impose sanctions. However, serious criminal offenses, such as sexual violence, are handled by civilian criminal courts.

Although these laws do not always explicitly mention sexual exploitation and abuse in peacekeeping contexts, they grant Nepal the legal authority to exercise jurisdiction over its deployed personnel. In practice, allegations of SEAH involving Nepali peacekeepers are handled through cooperation between UN investigative bodies and the national military or police justice systems.

Gender Equality and Workplace Harassment Laws

Nepal has also enacted laws specifically addressing gender-based discrimination and workplace harassment. The Sexual Harassment at the Workplace (Prevention) Act, 2015, defines legal terms, outlines complaint procedures, and sets out employer duties to prevent and address sexual harassment. Although primarily aimed at civilian workplaces, the Act reflects evolving national standards on professional behavior and gender-safe work environments, which are increasingly relevant to peacekeeping missions, particularly regarding sexual harassment faced by women peacekeepers.

Additionally, the Domestic Violence (Crime and Punishment) Act, 2009, together with related regulations and policies, reinforces the state's duty to prevent and address gender-based violence. Along with constitutional guarantees, these laws establish a supportive normative framework that condemns sexual violence and promotes the protection of victims.

National Policies on Women, Peace, and Security

Nepal's National Action Plans (NAPs) on UNSCRs 1325 and 1820 (2011; 2019) provide a policy link between domestic gender commitments and international peacekeeping efforts. They emphasize the security sector as a crucial actor in advancing the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, prioritizing gender-sensitive training, increased women's participation in security institutions, and measures to prevent sexual and gender-based violence.

Although the NAPs primarily focus on domestic peacebuilding, they acknowledge Nepal's role in UN peacekeeping and the importance of deployed personnel adhering to international standards. Therefore, they provide policy guidance on integrating gender perspectives and SEAH prevention into peacekeeping training, deployment decisions, and institutional reform.

Gaps in Legal Articulation and Enforcement

Despite this robust legal architecture, significant gaps remain. Nepal's military and police laws lack a unified, peacekeeping-focused legal framework to address SEAH in international missions. Regulations on sexual offenses are scattered across criminal law, disciplinary rules, and policy documents, which can hinder coordination, transparency, and reporting.

Additionally, information on investigations and prosecutions related to SEAH allegations involving peacekeepers is limited. Although confidentiality and due process are essential, the lack of detailed outcome reporting can undermine confidence in accountability efforts. Addressing this gap through clearer procedures and transparent

public reporting, while still protecting victims, would improve Nepal's legal compliance and its international reputation.

Implications for Gender-Responsive Peacekeeping

Taken together, Nepal's constitutional guarantees, criminal law provisions, security sector legislation, and WPS policies provide a solid legal foundation for preventing and responding to SEAH. However, as Nepal's peacekeeping role expands, the challenge is to translate these norms into consistent practice across deployments. Strengthening the link between national law and UN standards, clarifying jurisdictional procedures, and explicitly including SEAH in peacekeeping-specific regulations would improve both accountability and gender responsiveness.

6.2 Pre-deployment training and codes of conduct

Pre-deployment training at the Birendra Peace Operations Training Center and at police academies usually covers modules on:

- UN codes of conduct and standards on SEA.
- International law addresses humanitarian and human rights issues.
- Cultural sensitivity and civilian protection.
- Gender and sexual violence related to conflict.

Given Nepal's deployment scale, these modules require regular updates to incorporate the latest UN guidance on SEAH, particularly regarding protections for women peacekeepers against harassment and abuse within missions (Mazurana & Donnelly, 2025; UNDPO, 2025b).

6.3 Gaps and challenges

Despite official commitments, several gaps remain.

- There is limited public information on how Nepal investigates allegations of misconduct against its peacekeepers and on the outcomes of these cases.
- Lack of sufficient gender-specific data on complaints from both host populations and Nepali staff.
- The underrepresentation of women in leadership and decision-making roles can undermine the enforcement of gender-sensitive policies.
- Potential gaps exist in post-deployment debriefing and psychosocial support for returning peacekeepers, especially for women who may have faced SEAH.

To maintain its status and responsibilities as the leading TCC, Nepal must deploy a substantial number of troops and strengthen its institutional culture, legal frameworks, and accountability mechanisms to ensure they are robust and gender responsive.

Nepal's rise to become the leading contributor of uniformed personnel to UN peacekeeping operations between 2023 and early 2025 marked a significant milestone in its foreign and security policy (The Kathmandu Post, 2024a; UNDPO, 2025b). Yet the subsequent UN funding crisis, which cut Nepal's deployment by roughly 300 personnel and allowed Uganda to overtake it in the rankings by early 2026 (SIPRI, 2026), is instructive: it shows that quantitative leadership built on troop numbers is contingent on forces well beyond any single T/PCC's

control, from Security Council politics to the solvency of major donors. Leadership in peacekeeping is, therefore, judged less by quantity and more by other factors, such as the ability of states to:

Nepal's position as the leading contributor of uniformed personnel to UN peacekeeping operations marks a significant milestone in its foreign and security policy (The Kathmandu Post, 2024a; UNDPO, 2025). However, leadership in peacekeeping is now judged less by quantity and more by other factors, such as states' ability to:

- Promote gender equality in deployments and mission leadership.
- Prevent and respond to SEAH in a credible, victim-centered way.
- Contribute to shaping and developing global norms and mechanisms, such as the Trust Fund in Support of Victims of SEA.

For Nepal, this means shifting from a focus on quantitative leadership, such as being the top troop contributor, to a focus on qualitative and normative leadership, such as setting standards for gender-responsive peacekeeping. Achieving this shift involves:

1. Deepening women's participation beyond numbers to include meaningful roles across leadership, operations, and policy;
2. Addressing SEAH as a systemic problem that affects both host communities and peacekeeping personnel, particularly women;
3. Aligning national military and police justice systems with international standards to promote accountability and reparations.

The broader UN environment, characterized by persistent SEA allegations and debates over peacekeeping's credibility, requires countries like Nepal to take proactive steps. Remaining silent or inactive on SEAH could jeopardize victims' rights and damage their international standing (AP News, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2017).

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusion

This article has explored Nepal's rise as the top contributor of uniformed personnel to UN peacekeeping missions between 2023 and 2025, and its recent recalibration to a leading-but-no-longer-top position amid a broader UN funding crisis, focusing throughout on gender, women's participation, and the ongoing issues of sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment (SEAH). It demonstrates that Nepal's strength in peacekeeping, based on troop numbers and the growing participation of women peacekeepers, coexists with complex normative responsibilities related to the credibility, ethics, and legitimacy of modern peace operations—responsibilities that persist and arguably grow more pressing regardless of Nepal's exact rank in the contributor table.

Nepal's commitment to gender-responsive peacekeeping is supported by a relatively strong domestic framework of norms and laws. Constitutional provisions ensure equality and women's rights, while the criminalization of sexual violence under the National Penal Code, along with disciplinary policies for the Nepal Army, Police, and Armed Police Force, provide a legal basis for preventing and addressing SEAH by state personnel. Nevertheless, these regulations are scattered across constitutional, criminal, military, and policy documents, lacking a unified, peacekeeping-specific legal framework that consolidates SEAH obligations for personnel on international missions. As Nepal's profile as a leading troop-contributing nation grows in prominence and influence, this fragmentation creates a significant governance gap. To close this gap, implementing more explicit procedural

guidance, enhancing transparency in accountability results, and better aligning with UN victim-centered standards would foster legal adherence and position Nepal as a normative leader, beyond just a significant contributor to peacekeeping.

From a gender perspective, Nepal's relatively high proportion of women peacekeepers marks significant progress. However, structural barriers persist, limiting women's access to senior leadership and decision-making roles within missions. Expanding women's participation beyond numerical targets to include command, staff, and policy influence is crucial not only for achieving gender equality but also for transforming institutional cultures that enable SEAH. Evidence from peacekeeping research indicates that gender-diverse, accountable institutions are more likely to prevent misconduct, respond credibly to violations, and foster trust with host communities.

Nepal's domestic legal responsibilities are also intertwined with emerging global accountability mechanisms, especially the UN Trust Fund for victims of sexual exploitation and abuse. The same criminal and disciplinary laws that enable Nepal to investigate and prosecute peacekeepers for sexual misconduct also provide the legal basis for engaging with the Trust Fund's reparative initiatives. This includes cooperating with UN investigations and accepting financial responsibility if misconduct is confirmed. Consequently, contributions to the Trust Fund, whether monetary or otherwise, are not merely voluntary acts of goodwill but align with Nepal's constitutional obligation to protect victims of sexual violence and its statutory obligation to hold state actors accountable for criminal behavior.

Nepal's rise as a leading peacekeeping contributor presents both strategic and ethical opportunities. By refining its legal frameworks on SEAH, increasing transparency and accountability, promoting women's leadership in peace operations, and actively supporting victim-centered initiatives such as the UN Trust Fund, Nepal can elevate its role from quantitative to one of qualitative and normative influence. This transition would strengthen protections for host communities and peacekeepers alike while bolstering the long-term legitimacy and sustainability of UN peacekeeping amid increased scrutiny and reform.

7.2 Recommendation

Based on these analyses, several recommendations emerge:

8.2.1 For the Government of Nepal and its Security Institutions

1. Develop a comprehensive national policy on SEAH in peacekeeping

- Consolidate existing norms, including UN codes, national laws, and WPS commitments, into a clear policy governing the conduct of all Nepali peacekeepers abroad. This policy should explicitly address SEAH issues affecting both host communities and mission personnel.

2. Enhance pre-deployment and in-mission training

- Expand training programs by incorporating gender equality, SEAH, and victim-centered approaches, using scenario-based exercises and case studies from UN reports and academic research.
- Ensure that all ranks, including senior officers, participate in this training.

3. Increase women's participation and leadership.

- Establish progressive national targets to increase the proportion of women in contingents, police units, staff officer roles, and leadership positions, in line with or exceeding UN parity targets (UNDPO, 2025b).

- Address barriers to recruitment, promotion, and deployment across the Nepal Army, Armed Police Force, and Nepal Police.

4. Enhance investigation and accountability mechanisms

- Establish clear procedures for investigating allegations against Nepali peacekeepers, including timelines, victim-protection measures, and transparency safeguards.
- Enhance collaboration with the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) and relevant host-state authorities as appropriate.

5. Support victims and returnees

- Provide post-deployment debriefings and psychosocial support to returning peacekeepers, including designated channels for women to report SEAH experienced during missions.
- Consider making national contributions, whether financial or in kind, to victim-support mechanisms such as the Trust Fund and relevant UN programs to demonstrate political commitment.

7.2.2 For the United Nations

1. Disaggregate and publish data on SEAH

- Continue enhancing data collection on SEAH, disaggregated by mission, gender, and status (civilian, military, police), while ensuring confidentiality—a direction partly realized by the system-wide reporting introduced in the Secretary-General's 2026 report, though disaggregation specific to peacekeeping missions remains incomplete (UNDPO, 2025b; United Nations, 2026).

2. Integrate SEAH into policy frameworks concerning peacekeepers

- Expand the UN's SEAH framework to systematically address sexual harassment and abuse within missions, in addition to its current focus on SEA against host communities (Donnelly & Mazurana, 2025).

3. Ensure fairness in financial sanctions and Trust Fund mechanisms

- Distribute withheld reimbursements carefully to avoid penalizing victims or impeding TCCs' ability to carry out reforms, particularly in lower-income states.

8.2. 3 For academic research and policy discussions

1. Document the experiences of Nepali women peacekeepers.

- Future studies should conduct qualitative interviews with Nepali women peacekeepers and police officers to gain deeper insight into their contributions, challenges, and experiences related to SEAH.

2. Analyze the politics behind achieving top-contributor status.

- Scholars should examine how Nepal's status as the top contributor affects its bargaining position in the UN, its internal civil-military relations, and its policies on gender and accountability.

3. Assess the impact of the Trust Fund

- Empirical research is essential for assessing the Trust Fund's effectiveness in supporting victims and its impact on TCC behavior, including in Nepal.

In sum, Nepal's rise to the top of the peacekeeping contributor rankings presents a unique opportunity. By combining its quantitative leadership with robust, gender-responsive policies and genuine involvement in global efforts to combat SEAH, Nepal can move beyond merely supplying troops and become a leader that sets ethical and inclusive peacekeeping standards.

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