

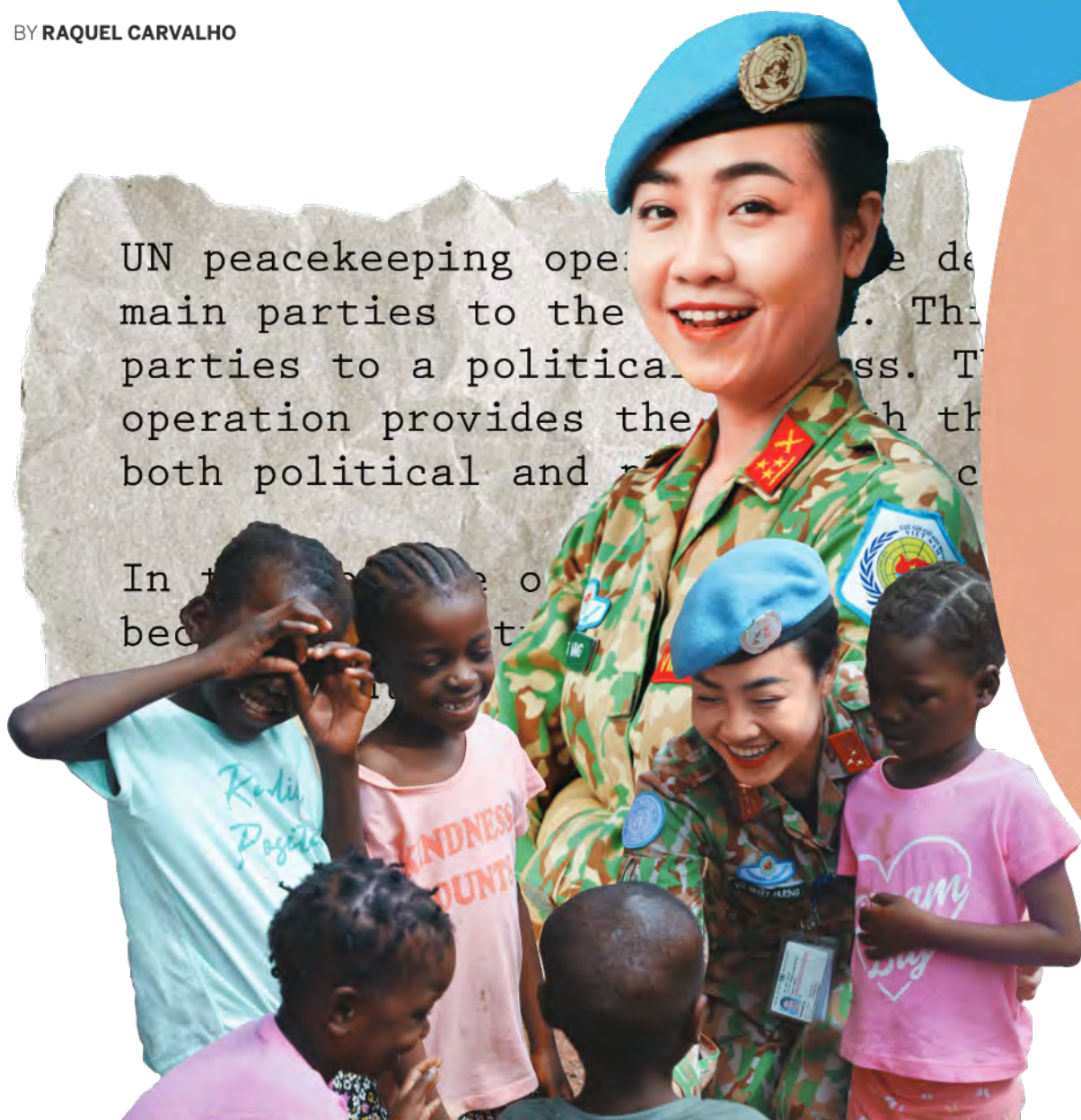
Discomfort zones

In 2000, not a single woman from the Asia-Pacific countries served in the UN peacekeeping forces. That has changed dramatically, with women from across the region breaking gender stereotypes to pursue careers in harsh environments thousands of miles from their homes and families.

BY RAQUEL CARVALHO

UN peacekeeping operations are deployed in some of the most dangerous and volatile parts of the world. The main parties to the conflict are often the same. The operation provides the only source of security for both political and military leaders.

In the past, women have often been overlooked in these operations.



Above: Vietnamese army captain Vu Nhat Huong worked as a UN peacekeeper in the Central African Republic last year.

Right: Huong interviews a female Tunisian officer in preparation for the UN Peacekeeping Day in the Central African Republic in May last year. Pictures: courtesy of Vu Nhat Huong



deployment of a United Nations peacekeeping mission does not necessarily imply or guarantee that the local level, particularly if



Above: Indonesian Second Lieutenant Indira Putri (far left) with other UN peacekeepers in the Central African Republic. **Right:** Putri with a fellow blue beret. Pictures: courtesy of Indira Putri

When Vu Nhat Huong, a 31-year-old army captain from Vietnam, told her parents she was going to be deployed on a foreign mission as a United Nations peacekeeper, her mother burst into tears. “You are a very strong woman,” she said, “but why do you want to do something so different from other women?”

Although such questions weren’t easy for her to hear, let alone answer, Huong went on to serve as a UN communications officer in the Central African Republic, one of the world’s poorest countries and one which has struggled with decades of instability and violence. From her outpost in the capital Bangui, she counted off 329 days on a paper calendar that she spent away from her loved ones, before returning to Vietnam last December.

Living in the Central African Republic felt like being in “an old film”, she says. The volatile security situation together with extreme heat – temperatures can rise as high as 45 degrees Celsius – a lack of water and electricity and an alien culture made it all the more challenging. Often homesick, she would go days without being able to speak to her family due to the poor internet connections.

Towards the end of her deployment, Huong says, her body became so numb and limp that she could hear

people talking around her but couldn’t utter a word herself. It turned out she had contracted malaria and she spent three days in hospital.

Looking back, she says it was all worth it. Currently based in the Vietnamese capital, Hanoi, Huong has already set her sights on another foreign mission: she would like to apply to the engineering contingent. Ideally, though, she wants to get married first.

“In Vietnam, we should get married at like 28 or 30 years old,” she says, admitting that she hasn’t had much time for dating. “If I get lucky, I will get married this year, but if the mission comes earlier I will take it.”

Back in 2000, there were no female UN peacekeepers from the Asia-Pacific region. As of March, however, there were 2,083 female peacekeepers from Asia. Yet, despite their growing numbers, globally, women constitute only 8 per cent of all uniformed UN peacekeepers, often referred to as the blue berets.

Indira Putri, a 29-year-old Indonesian second lieutenant, from East Kalimantan in Borneo, who has been in the Central African Republic since September last year, also had to learn how to deal with her family’s expectations. “I was not persuaded to give up my dream, but they kept asking why I was interested,” she says. “They were quite shocked in the beginning.”

Although it came as a surprise to her family, Putri had harboured the dream of becoming an officer since

deployment of a United Nations peacekeeping mission does not necessarily imply or guarantee that the situation will improve at the local level, particularly if...



Left and above: Cambodian Major Sen Sophirum with locals in South Sudan. Pictures: courtesy of Sen Sophirum

she was a child. “I often saw a female police officer who helped in my school, directing drivers and managing traffic, and I wanted to be like her,” she says.

One of three daughters, Putri joined her local police force in 2014 and eventually became a UN peacekeeper last year, moved by the idea of helping those affected by conflict and deprived of basic human rights, such as decent housing and clean water.

“I am different from my siblings, who prefer to stay at home and live in their comfort zones,” she says.

When Putri landed in the Central African Republic, the culture shock was instant. The dirt roads, the crowds, the stares – it was unlike anything she had experienced.

Based in Bangui, she has been in charge of managing the UN camp and handling other operational affairs. As she has grown familiar with the place, her relatives – more than 10,000km away – have also gained a better understanding of her job.

“In the beginning, they were worried and they kept contacting me all the time,” she says, “but I asked them not to worry too much.”

This July, representatives from the 10-country Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), and observer state East Timor, took part in a high-level meeting in Indonesia, where they discussed the importance of integrating a gender lens in their response to security challenges across the region, including climate-related issues, cybersecurity and violent extremism. This came after the December launch of Asean’s Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security, which provided a regional framework focused on promoting women’s representation and participation.

Major Sen Sophirum, 35, always had her family’s support, but that does not mean she was immune to

social pressure. Originally from a small village in Kampong Thom province, in central Cambodia, Sen Sophirum has had her fair share of negative comments over her career choice. “People in the village said that as a girl I should not join the military,” she says, “because I should not stay far from home or go to other places. They believed that [kind of] work was only for men.”

Sen Sophirum blames such perceptions on the small numbers of women joining the military and, being only 19 at the time, she almost gave up. “I was doubtful and thought that maybe I did not want to join,” she says. “My mum and close relatives gave me the strength and motivated me.”

Having taken part in two previous foreign missions, Sen Sophirum is now based in South Sudan as a UN military observer, at a permanent station in the central region of Bor. The camp is mostly clean and lush, though floods often bring rubbish and a stench from nearby open-air toilets.

While on leave back home in February, Sen Sophirum got married to another soldier.

“I was independent and now I have someone,” she says. “It’s not pressure. But it feels that my life is a bit different – I need some time to get used to it [...] I plan to have a kid, so maybe I won’t be able to join a peacekeeping mission for several years. I don’t want to miss opportunities, but perhaps I will support peacekeeping from my home country.”

Sen Sophirum’s work demands have only increased since a conflict erupted in Sudan in mid-April, uprooting more than 3 million people, including hundreds of thousands who have fled to neighbouring nations such as South Sudan.

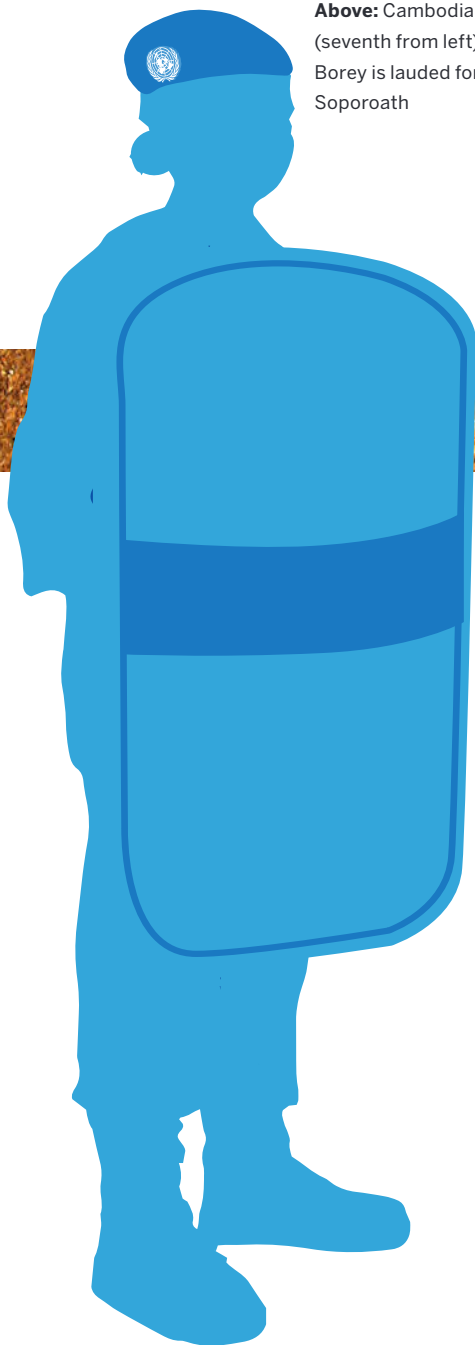


Above: Cambodian Lieutenant Colonel Chhorm Borey (seventh from left) in Bor, South Sudan. **Right:** Chhorm Borey is lauded for her work. Pictures: courtesy of Chan Soporoath



red with the consent of the
quires a commitment by the
acceptance of a peacekeepin
necessary freedom of action
at its mandated tasks.

oping operation risk.
g drawn towards
amental role of kee



“Many people carry weapons with them,” she says, “so I work harder with higher alertness in the dangerous areas.”

Sen Sophirum tries to speak with her husband, currently in Cambodia, almost every day.

“It’s a bit hard to be apart, but it’s military life,” she shrugs. “He understands.”

Lieutenant Colonel Chhorm Borey, 38, originally from Cambodia’s Takeo province, knows only too well how difficult it is to balance family and military life. Her daughter was one year and four months old when she left for a mission in South Sudan. She says the first few months away from her child, who was being looked after by her grandmother, were the hardest. “We spoke every day [via video call] so she would not forget my face,” she says.

Before joining the military in 2011, Chhorm Borey was a Khmer literature teacher at a high school for four years. She says she was drawn by the job prospects, the salary and the opportunity to learn foreign languages.

“I thought this was man’s work,” she says, “but then I believed I could do it.”

Although she had her parents’ support from the beginning, Chhorm Borey says her mother initially voiced concerns because she was single at the time. In 2017, she got married to a Cambodian peacekeeper she’d met in South Sudan. However, marriage has not been without

its challenges. Chhorm Borey – now home in Phnom Penh having completed four deployments abroad – says she has faced “some pressure” when it comes to performing family duties. “We have been to the same countries but at different times,” she says. “Although we had some difficulties, we were able to resolve them. As peacekeepers, we have a mutual understanding.”

Although Chhorm Borey says she has not personally faced discrimination during her military career, she has encountered male colleagues who believed in stereotypical gender roles and considered women to be weaker.

“Some of the men in my company expressed the concern that we [women] could be a burden [...] especially when deployed in hot zones,” she says. “I was not angry. I know that women can do any kind of job. We don’t just belong in the kitchen, we receive the same training.”

Sen Sophirum says that she had been on the receiving end of demeaning comments earlier in her career, but “things started improving on my second mission in South Sudan, perhaps because they received more education about gender [equality]”. However, she says it is still harder for women to rise in the military.

Sen Sophirum, who intends to join more foreign missions, says greater support for women to pursue their professional ambitions is needed at home.

“There should be some change,” she says. “[Men] should be more involved in the housework and give more time for the women to go out to work and achieve their goals.”

She says there also needs to be a shift in mentality among women themselves: “In Cambodia, when they get married they have to stay looking after their husband and children, sometimes they don’t want to go out to work and quit [their jobs]. There is this mentality issue and cultural obstacle.”

“PEOPLE IN THE VILLAGE SAID THAT AS A GIRL I SHOULD NOT JOIN THE MILITARY, BECAUSE I SHOULD NOT STAY FAR FROM HOME OR GO TO OTHER PLACES. THEY BELIEVED THAT [KIND OF] WORK WAS ONLY FOR MEN.” – Major Sen Sophirum, from Cambodia



Above: Indonesian First lieutenant Fitri Rahmasari (centre) with colleagues in the Central African Republic.
Right and far right: Rahmasari on missions in the capital, Bangui. Pictures: courtesy of Fitri Rahmasari



UN peacekeeping operations are de
main parties to the conflict. Th
to a political process. Th
provides the UN with th
and physical, to c
ch consent, a
he conflict;
away from



UN

First Lieutenant Fitri Rahmasari, 29, from Jakarta, Indonesia, will finish her mission as a liaison officer in the Central African Republic this month. She is one of 25 women in the nearly 400-strong Indonesian contingent of police and military peacekeepers. When Rahmasari is not out patrolling and talking with locals, she works from an office made of industrial containers, with a floor covered in blue plastic, where schedules and contingency plans are drafted.

Despite hygiene challenges due to the limited water supply, she says her workload is the same as that of her male colleagues and she brushes off any gender prescriptive jokes.

“Our workload is balanced,” she says. “If the men are doing security, we are also assigned [to do that], and if the women are cooking, the men are cooking.” In fact, Rahmasari says that being a woman has made her job easier. “We feel that local people accept women better than men,” she says. “They don’t see us as a threat and they also don’t discriminate against us. Being a woman is definitely an advantage as a peacekeeper.”

According to Rahmasari, women peacekeepers can play a major role in tackling sensitive issues such as sexual abuse, which is “very much intertwined with the economic and political issues of the place, therefore I feel the need for more training to better understand the population and their needs. We cannot just say, ‘If you have any cases, you can report it to us.’ We need to have a conversation with them ... We need to be better at communicating with them in their language.”

Dozens of allegations against male UN peacekeepers in countries such as the Central African Republic and Haiti have come to light in recent years, with many being accused of sexually abusing women and even young children. Some were allegedly exploited in exchange for food or money.

Despite improvements in reporting and support mechanisms, the UN has been criticised for not acting with sufficient speed or sensitivity when such cases are uncovered, while the accused’s home countries rarely prosecute alleged perpetrators. Other women peacekeepers note there are strict UN guidelines in place, but agree that further training is needed. Chhorm Borey, who says she has never encountered such cases herself, argues that empowering local women and enhancing their understanding of these issues are crucial steps to eliminating the problem.

“We tried to disseminate and [organise] outreach activities to educate local people and help them understand domestic violence, physical violence and sexual assault,” she says, adding that the UN has made it clear that peacekeepers are forbidden from paying for sex, whether with cash or goods.

Major Nguyen Van Thu, 36, from Vietnam, has welcomed the growing number of female colleagues in



Picture: courtesy of Chan Soporoath

Left: Lieutenant Colonel Chan Soporoath, from Cambodia, presents a certificate to a female blue beret in Mali. **Right:** Major Nguyen Van Thu welcomes the rise in the number of female colleagues at the UN peacekeeping forces.



Picture: courtesy of Nguyen Van Thu

the UN peacekeeping forces. In his opinion, women play an essential role in handling cases of sexual abuse and harassment, as most of the victims are women and children. Thu agrees that women tend to be better received by locals and, regardless of the issue, “if a woman takes part in negotiations she is more likely to succeed”.

Chan Soporoath, a 34-year-old lieutenant colonel from Cambodia who has served in four UN peacekeeping missions in Africa, says that since he joined the force in 2009, “the operations and working environment have become more effective in many ways” due to a sharp increase in the number of women. Chan Soporoath, currently based in Phnom Penh, says gender equality is “essential for peace and security. I try to act as a role model ... motivating and encouraging my female juniors to have more confidence”. At the same time, he says, he has “tried to set an example for other men that we should promote gender equality”.

Sarah Knibbs, regional director for UN Women in Asia and the Pacific, says that the region can become a driving force for female representation within the peacekeeping forces, but training and opportunities, including programmes such as the Female Military Officers’ Course, need more financial backing from member states. She adds, “More efforts are required to advocate for meaningful roles for women peacekeepers [and] for women to be in leadership positions.”

Soumita Basu, an associate professor at the South Asian University’s department of international relations, in New Delhi, agrees that the missions should be “more representative”, noting that “the onus lies with

troop-contributing countries to work towards gender parity in their national forces”.

Critics have, however, warned against stereotyping women peacekeepers. Nina Wilén, director of the Egmont Institute, says: “There is definitely a risk of increasing gender stereotypes when the reasoning behind demands to increase the number of women peacekeepers comes from expectations about women behaving in ways that are considered typically feminine, softer, gentler, more peaceful.”

She notes this could lead to “harmful consequences” for both the status and legitimacy of women peacekeepers. Wilén says all peacekeepers, regardless of gender, should be capable of doing the tasks to which they are assigned. “No extra expectation, which often transforms into an extra burden, should be put on female peacekeepers to add something particularly feminine.”

Chhorm Borey says the new generations’ prospects are brighter. But she urges the Cambodian government to provide more opportunities and encourage women like herself who are married and have families to go on overseas missions.

“I love this job, I have experience in real war, and also experience in Cambodia,” she says, having drawn strength from hard-working local women she met in countries like South Sudan, who face poor sanitary conditions, lack medical care, and endure domestic violence. “I plan to go on another mission – but for now, I need time for my family.”

For Vu Nhat Huong, it’s not only relatives who are proud of her achievements but also the general Vietnamese public who are increasingly supportive.

Indonesia’s Fitri Rahmasari has no doubts that her work is making a difference. “Being a woman peacekeeper is a positive message in itself,” she says. “It sends the message that women are safer and empowers them. It also shows that women are able to do the same things that men can do.” ■

“WE FEEL THAT LOCAL PEOPLE ACCEPT WOMEN BETTER THAN MEN. THEY DON’T SEE US AS A THREAT AND THEY ALSO DON’T DISCRIMINATE AGAINST US. BEING A WOMAN IS DEFINITELY AN ADVANTAGE AS A PEACEKEEPER.” – Indonesian First Lieutenant Fitri Rahmasari