



## Gender, innovation & the military: the benefits of a human-rights based approach

### CSW67 Side Event

Friday 10 March, 10.00 – 11.15am

**Location:** Conference Room B, United Nations Headquarters Conference Building,  
405E 42nd St, New York, NY 10017

This event will showcase the progression of women in the military from a global perspective and take an intersectional look at how the inclusion of women enhances capability. Panellists will explore how the integration of data, technology and innovation can accelerate progress and overcome barriers to women's participation.

The Australian Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Kate Jenkins, of the AHRC and Australian Deputy Chief of Army, Natasha Fox, AM CSC will discuss the 10-year collaboration between the Australian Defence Force and the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) – a unique partnership between a military and a national human rights institution (NHRI). Through the collaboration, the AHRC adopts a human-rights based approach to organisational cultural reform, which the full and effective participation of women and the elimination of violence are key priorities to support a modern workforce that can excel in military operations.

The recent barrier assessment for women in the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces, utilising the innovative *Measuring Opportunities for Women in Peace Operations (MOWIP)* methodology, will also be highlighted with key findings and next steps shared as part of the discussion. In addition, Major General Maureen O'Brien, UN Deputy Military Advisor, will share her experience drawing on a distinguished career serving in 8 overseas missions (including Lebanon, Western Sahara, East Timor, Sarajevo and Chad) and as the first woman promoted to the rank of General in the Irish Defence Forces.

Digital transformation across the UN system is essential to ensuring a data-driven approach to recruitment, retention and training to achieve gender parity. Australia, in partnership with the UN Department of Peace Operations, is establishing a Peacekeeping Innovation Hub to leverage technology, drive a culture of innovation and apply a gender-lens to address key challenges in UN peacekeeping.

Panellists will discuss the nature of women's participation in the military, the challenges of long-term change and opportunities for further advancement of gender equality.

Topics discussed during this event will include:

1. STEM challenges to the attraction, recruitment and retention of women
2. Intersectionality and First Nations women
3. Barriers to women's participation in the military
4. Personal experiences in a global context

## Agenda

- Welcome and introduction by Chair (5 mins)
- Overview by panellists:
  - Kate Jenkins, Australia's Sex Discrimination Commissioner (10 mins)
  - Major General Natasha Fox AM CSC (10 mins)
  - The Hon Baindu Dassama-Kamara, Minister of Social Welfare, Republic of Sierra Leone (10 mins)
  - Major General Maureen O'Brien (10 mins)
- Q&A facilitated by Chair (25 mins)
- Close: Kate Jenkins, Australia's Sex Discrimination Commissioner

## Background

The collaboration between the AHRC and the Australian Defence Force was established in 2014 with the intent to support cultural reform. The relationship between these two organisations highlights the value of an independent voice; Defence's willingness to receive the AHRC's advice has resulted in shifts towards a more equitable, safe and inclusive work environment, particularly for female personnel.

The focus of collaboration has evolved over time. It spans broad 'cultural temperature checks' and deep dives into individual workforces, as well gender-sensitive analysis of recruitment processes. The recent 'Indigenous inclusivity in Defence' project considered the lived experience of First Nations women in Defence, and institutional challenges to consistently supporting intersectionality.

In 2022 UN Women and the Republic of Sierra Leone Ministry of Defence undertook a comprehensive barrier assessment of the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF), supported by the Elsie Initiative Fund. The barrier assessment, which used the DCAF – the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance's Measuring Opportunities for Women in Peace Operations – [MOWIP methodology](#), aimed to understand and identify the gaps and challenges inhibiting the equal and meaningful participation of women in the military. The assessment investigated the gender roles, power dynamics, norms and practices related to recruitment, retention, capacity building and promotion of female personnel in the RSLAF. Through the Elsie Initiative Fund, participants are helping contribute to a global database on barriers to, and emerging practices to sustainably increase uniformed women's participation to United Nations peace operations. Australia remains a top 5 donor to the [Elsie Initiative Fund](#).



## Speakers

**The Hon Baidou Dassama-Kamara, Minister of Social Welfare, Republic of Sierra Leone:** Since 2018, Minister Baidou Dassama has served in President Bio's cabinet as the Minister of Social Welfare in the Republic of Sierra Leone. Minister Dassama was pivotal in leading the national response to the Presidential Declaration on the state of National Emergency against sexual violence in Sierra Leone, integrating a multisectoral approach to programming. She has been a champion on disability rights and inclusion, leading a nation-wide strategy to address discrimination of persons with disabilities. Minister Dassama has spearheaded the reform of legislation, policies and programmes in Sierra Leone on welfare, human rights and religious tolerance and continues to be a strong advocate globally for gender equality.

**Kate Jenkins:** Kate Jenkins is the Sex Discrimination Commissioner and a member of the Australian Human Rights Commission. Her purpose is to advance gender equality and the rights of LGBTIQ+ Communities, consistent with the Sex Discrimination Act and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Kate is the Chair of the Respect@Work Council and leads action to implement the *Respect@Work: National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces Report (2020)*, including conducting the 2022 National sexual harassment survey. Kate leads the Commission's collaborative projects on cultural reform with the Australian Defence Force, Australian Federal Police and Australian Border Force. Kate's other projects include: Change the Course: national survey sexual harassment and sexual assault at Australian universities (2017); Change the Routine: Review of Gymnastics in Australia (2021); and Set the Standard: Independent Review of Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces (2021)

**Major General Natasha Fox: Major General Fox is the Deputy Chief of Army.** Major General Natasha Fox entered the Australian Defence Force Academy in 1988 and graduated from the Royal Military College in 1991. Her early appointments were in logistics specialising in combat supplies and planning, and in training positions culminating with her being the Commanding Officer/Chief Instructor at the Australian Defence Force Academy for which she received a Conspicuous Service Cross.

Major General Fox has been employed across the Australian Defence Force in Forces Command, Joint Logistics Command, Special Operations Command, Training Command - Army, and Defence People Group. She has deployed to Lebanon, Syria, and Israel and was the Chief of Staff for Joint Task Force 633 in the Middle East where she was appointed a member of the Order of Australia (AM) for her service.

**Major General Maureen O'Brien:** Major General O'Brien is currently the Deputy Military Advisor in the Department of Peace Operations, a position she has held since July 2021. Before joining the Irish Defence Forces in 1981, Maj. Gen O'Brien graduated from University College Galway with a B.Sc. and Higher Diploma in Education. Major General O'Brien has since held appointments in operations, training and strategic planning at battalion, brigade and Headquarters level. She served as an Infantry Battalion Commander and Director of Communications and Information Services.

Maj. Gen. O'Brien has extensive overseas service including UN deployments to Lebanon, Western Sahara and East Timor. In 2005 Major General O'Brien was seconded to the OSCE in Sarajevo for eighteen months. In 2009 she became the first Irish female officer to serve as a Deputy Commanding Officer of an infantry battalion in CHAD (MINURCAT) and in 2021 deployed to UNIFIL once more as Chief of Operations Planning. On promotion to Brigadier General in 2019, Major General O'Brien deployed as Deputy Force Commander of the UN Disengagement Observer Forces (UNDOF) in the Golan, Syria.