

NEW UNIFIL INITIATIVE TO ENSURE GENDER PERSPECTIVE IN HOST COMMUNITIES

Aoibheann O'Sullivan, September 8, 2016

The UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) last month set up a special team of uniformed and civilian female members of the peacekeeping mission to ensure a gender perspective is present when various battalions interact with female members of the host communities.

The Female Assessment/Analysis and Support Team (FAST), set up within UNIFIL's Gender Affairs Office, is made up of 21 uniformed and civilian UNIFIL peacekeepers based across UNIFIL's area of operations. Each member of the team is trained and on call to UNIFIL contingents to provide a female presence in culturally sensitive settings.

Within the first three weeks of launching FAST, there has been as many meetings between the FAST teams and groups of women residents in villages across southern Lebanon. The reception to FAST has been well received, according to UNIFIL's Gender Affairs Office.

A UNIFIL Gender Affairs Officer, Rana Rahal, attended these first meetings, and said she is proud to be part of this initiative.

"Local women bonded with the female peacekeepers, expressed their concerns about safety issues, requested support on very small but important issues to them," said Ms. Rahal. "Most importantly they expressed their satisfaction. One resident even commented that she "knows that UNIFIL leadership established FAST specifically for them."

UNIFIL strives to be more gender inclusive. It is well documented that the visible presence of female peacekeepers makes missions more approachable to women living in the surrounding communities. The same goes for south Lebanon. Here women have reported "feeling more comfortable" to disclose or report culturally sensitive information or threats to other women peacekeepers.

Within UNIFIL, the overall percentage of uniformed female peacekeepers is only 3 per cent, but some battalions and military units have no women at all. FAST was specifically designed to counter this, and ensure a gender perspective can be always present, particularly on sensitive issues.

FAST will support, communicate and if necessary intervene on any given issue. The aim with the presence of FAST is twofold: Firstly, women in the community will have the opportunity to be consulted by a female UNIFIL peacekeeper, and secondly FAST will provide UNIFIL with a new more inclusive perspective on safety and security.

“These women care a lot about their country's future and they strongly want to be a part of it,” said an Italian UNIFIL Peacekeeper and FAST member, Major Valentina Floris, after attending one of the meetings. “We work where women suffered a lot, or where they feel inhibited, and we create a real opportunity to express their point of view and to contribute actively in the public life of their villages.”