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Gender in International Bureaucracies: Evidence from UN Field Missions

RESEARCH NOTE

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Contemporary international organizations, including the UN, employ tens of thousands of staff outside of their headquarters in field offices around the world. Despite attempts to promote gender equity, significant differences persist in male and female officials' experiences of working in UN field offices and missions. Drawing on a series of internal surveys of UN field staff, we demonstrate that, relative to men, women report having worse relationships with peers, supervisors, and management as well as having less confidence in performance appraisal mechanisms. Through a qualitative analysis of survey comments, archival materials, and semi-structured interviews, we highlight distinct gendered dynamics of working in field offices that affect international bureaucrats' workplace experiences.

Las organizaciones internacionales contemporáneas, incluyendo la ONU, emplean a decenas de miles de empleados fuera de sus sedes en sucursales ubicadas alrededor del mundo. A pesar de los intentos de promover la equidad de género, persisten diferencias significativas entre las experiencias a nivel de trabajo de los funcionarios y las de las funcionarias en las sucursales y en las misiones de campo de la ONU. Partimos de una serie de encuestas internas al personal de las sucursales de la ONU, que nos permiten demostrar que, en comparación con los hombres, las mujeres aseguran tener peores relaciones con sus compañeros, supervisores y directores, así como menos confianza en los mecanismos de evaluación del rendimiento. A través de un análisis cualitativo de los comentarios de las encuestas, así como de materiales archivísticos y entrevistas semiestructuradas, destacamos las dinámicas de género distintas del trabajo en las oficinas de campo que afectan las experiencias laborales de los burócratas internacionales.

Les organisations internationales actuelles, y compris l'ONU, emploient des dizaines de milliers de personnes en dehors de leur siège, dans des bureaux extérieurs répartis dans le monde entier. Malgré les efforts déployés pour promouvoir l'égalité des sexes, des différences significatives persistent entre les expériences des fonctionnaires masculins et féminins qui travaillent dans les bureaux extérieurs et les missions de l'ONU. Sur la base d'une série d'enquêtes internes menées auprès du personnel extérieur de l'ONU, nous révélons que, par rapport aux hommes, les femmes déclarent avoir de moins bonnes relations avec leurs collègues, leurs supérieurs et la direction, ainsi qu'une moindre confiance dans les mécanismes d'évaluation des performances. Grâce à une analyse qualitative des commentaires issus de ces enquêtes, des archives et des entretiens semi-structurés, nous exposons les dynamiques sexospécifiques distinctes qui caractérisent le travail dans les bureaux extérieurs et qui influent sur l'expérience professionnelle des fonctionnaires internationaux.

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Introduction

Contemporary international organizations (IOs) employ tens of thousands of staff outside their headquarters across field offices worldwide. Several IOs, including the UN, have been concerned with the low proportion of women among their staff, especially in field locations, and have developed strategies to promote gender parity and equity. Nevertheless, significant differences persist in how women and men experience working for IOs. In this research note, we draw on diverse data sources to investigate gender-based differences in IO employees' experiences of working in field offices.

While existing literature has highlighted the severity and persistence of gender gaps in international bureaucracies (Haack 2014; Bode 2020), it has three important limitations. First, studies have focused on gender and IO leadership, without investigating the more numerous rank-and-file IO officials. Second, scholarship has tended to focus on numerical (dis)parity between employees of different genders rather than differences in their workplace experience. Third, there has been a lack of attention to the gendered dimensions of work in field locations.

This research note addresses these three gaps by focusing on the experiences of male and female employees of the UN Secretariat who work in the field, adopting a mixed-methods research design that combines the analysis of four original internal UN staff surveys available exclusively to our research team with interview and archival data. Our findings show that women's experiences of working for the UN Secretariat in the field are worse than men's across a range of indicators. Compared to their male counterparts, women report lower confidence in performance appraisals and worse relationships with management, supervisors, and peers. Women are also more concerned than men about accountability in their organization. Data from survey comments, archives, and interviews suggests that this dissatisfaction is driven by the distinctive gendered experiences of working in IO field offices. These findings yield concrete policy implications. First, important differences in male and female staff's perceptions of supervisor feedback and consequences for underperformance in UN field missions indicate that IOs should improve accountability frameworks and supervisor training to reduce gendered biases in performance assessments. Second, since organizational cultures of IOs in field locations increase the risk of gender-based harassment, favor "macho" leadership styles, and are hostile to employees with care responsibilities, IOs should take additional steps to accommodate officials with family commitments, promote work-life balance, and prevent and punish abuse.

The remainder of this research note proceeds as follows. First, we survey the existing literature on gender in different types of international institutions, identifying the gaps that this note fills. Second, we justify the selection of the UN Secretariat as our case and outline our research strategy. Third, we analyze the UN staff surveys and report significant discrepancies in how female staff experience their work environment compared to male counterparts, across different settings and according to several relevant dimensions. Fourth, we focus on key dynamics in IO field offices that affect how women and men experience relationships with management and supervisors, interact with peers, and perceive feedback and performance appraisals. The conclusion summarizes our argument and outlines directions for further research.

IOs and Gender

Women's full and equal participation in IOs is an important equity issue.¹ It also improves IO effectiveness and legitimacy (Badache 2020; Weaver et al. 2022). Women's representation has been linked to positive, rights-enhancing outcomes in international politics, including in peacekeeping (Karim and Beardsley 2017), international justice (Voeten 2021), European governance (Hartlapp and Blome 2022), and development (Heinzel, Weaver, and Jorgensen 2025). However, the benefits of women's participation in IOs depend on establishing a work environment that enables women to fully contribute in their positions. Existing literature on gender in national and international institutions suggests widespread challenges in this regard, but the specific nature of obstacles in IO field offices has not yet been explored. We aim to fill this gap by examining how officials' gender affects their experiences of working in UN field missions.

Feminist institutionalists have long argued that institutions embody and entrench gender hierarchies (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010; Krook and Mackay 2011). At the international level, this scholarship has tended to focus on institutions as sets of norms, rules, and principles (Guerrina, Chappell, and Wright 2018; Holmes 2020; MacRae and Weiner 2021). Additionally, two research strands investigating international bureaucracies specifically have emerged. First, scholars have highlighted the underrepresentation of women among IO officials (Davies 2021; Weaver et al. 2022), the imbalances in ranks and portfolios between female and male staff (Hartlapp, Müller, and Tömmel 2021; Haack, Karns, and Murray 2022), and differences in male and female officials' perceptions of organizational support they receive (Giauque and Varone 2018). Second, research has demonstrated that gender dynamics negatively impact the experiences of female IO leaders (Haack 2014; Bode 2020; Standfield 2022; Jongen 2024).

We extend this research by focusing on the gendered workplace experiences of staff below the leadership level and, critically, in the field rather than headquarters locations. We argue that field locations give rise to specific gender dynamics that increase the likelihood of differential workplace experiences for female and male IO staff. This is despite multiple IO reform initiatives and several equality-promoting dynamics in IO field offices, such as the outsourcing of domestic labor to the local market, limited in-person care responsibilities due to distance from families, and elite status that is typical (but not universal) for officials in the field.

Literature on two other types of international work "in the field" supports this expectation. In diplomacy, legacies of male dominance in the profession mean that contemporary communication, networking, and socialization among diplomats still happen predominantly within male networks (Aggestam and Towns 2019; Niklasson, 2020; Aran and Brummer 2024). Careers in IOs differ from diplomatic services in important respects (including a less structured career path), but IO field offices are also historically male-dominated locations where women remain significantly less well represented than at headquarters (online appendix, Table E1).

Within the international aid sector, a macho or "cowboy" organizational culture leads to a deprioritization of gender equality (Vijfeijken 2019; James 2022; Gupta et

¹We use "women" and "female staff" to refer to UN employees who self-identify as such. Gender goes beyond the male–female binary, but most UN data sources refer to "male" and "female" staff.

al. 2023). Given restrictions on bringing family members to the field, many female aid workers believe they must choose between their career and having a family (Roth 2015; Gordon 2022; Strohmeier and Panter-Brick 2022). Isolation, shared accommodations, and socialization around alcohol increase workers' vulnerability to sexual violence (Read 2018; de Koeijer, Valerie, and Smith 2023). Staff in IO field offices tend to be better remunerated, less precariously employed, and enjoying greater prestige than aid workers in nongovernmental organizations. However, they also live in small, self-contained communities and often undertake emergency work in challenging settings.

The confluence of historically and currently male-dominated environments, tight-knit communities, and urgent work in challenging settings produces a high risk of gendered workplace dynamics in field locations that negatively affect the everyday work experiences of IO staff.

Case Selection and Methodology

The UN is a prominent IO with wide-ranging international responsibilities, including special duties to prevent and address armed conflicts. In December 2022, 42 percent of all UN Secretariat staff—15,417 employees—worked in fifty-two field locations, including thirty-eight special political missions and twelve peacekeeping operations (United Nations Secretary-General 2023).² We focus on UN missions for three reasons.

First, gender dynamics in UN field offices are substantively important. These entities employ thousands of officials, constituting one of the largest field-based international bureaucracies (online appendix, Table E1). Gender inequities are both inherently important and pose a risk to the effectiveness of missions created to help build peace, protect civilians, and advance human rights. They also undermine the ability of a UN mission, which aspires to be “a model for the communities it serves” (UN 2019b, 3), to promote gender equity norms.

Second, gender disparities in UN field offices are especially persistent. While the Secretariat has made progress toward gender parity in its headquarters offices, parity gains have proven more elusive in the field. The UN's 2017 *System-Wide Strategy on Gender Parity* recognized that UN missions are “where the greatest challenges to gender balance are experienced,” slowing down progress toward parity throughout the organization (UN 2017a, 21). Secretary-General Guterres has significantly increased the percentage of women among appointed senior mission leaders (UN 2019a, 15), but as of 2021 only 24.3 percent of all staff in UN missions were women, compared to 53.8 percent of UN headquarters staff (United Nations Secretary-General, 2021; online appendix, Table A3). UN field offices thus illustrate the persistence of gendered dynamics even when an organization's senior leadership enacts gender parity reforms.

Third, findings from UN missions are likely generalizable to other international bureaucracies with large field-based components. While each organization may have specific institutional legacies or work arrangements, there is no theoretical reason to believe that gender dynamics within UN missions are fundamentally different from those arising in field offices of other large international bureaucracies. We demonstrate that it is the way in which IOs approach work in the field that produces the most consequential gendered effects. We discuss generalizability further in the conclusion.

We bring a variety of data sources together to assess our argument: (1) four internal UN staff surveys, including our principal *Trust* survey, which provide statistical evidence across a representative sample of international staff; (2) survey comments, including from the *Trust* survey, which we manually coded for evidence of gendered workplace experiences, supplemented by a structural topic model (STM) analysis; (3) forty-six interviews with UN staff that revealed gendered dimensions of internal mission processes (see online appendix, Section C); and (4) UN archival materials and official documents. We outline the specific quantitative and qualitative strategies and sources in the corresponding sections. Our mixed-methods research design serves two key purposes: (1) staff surveys provide quantitative evidence of systematic disparities in the work experiences of female and male UN field staff, and (2) survey comments, interviews, archival data, and UN documents demonstrate how field dynamics contribute to these gendered experiences.

UN Field Staff *Trust* Survey: Systematic Gender-Based Disparities

To investigate whether systematic disparities exist between female and male international staff in UN field missions, we analyze a series of surveys conducted in 2020 and 2021 by the UN Field Staff Union (UNFSU), which represents all international staff in UN missions unless individuals opt out.³ The number of union members in 2020 fluctuated between 6,744 and 6,771. All members were invited to complete the four surveys we use in this research note: one round of a *Trust* survey (in July/August 2020) and three rounds of a COVID-19 impacts survey, in April 2020, September/October 2020, and May/June 2021. The survey questions are detailed in the online appendix, Tables B5 and B6. A total of 27 percent of staff (on average) completed the surveys, with samples broadly representative of the UN international field staff population (online appendix, Table A2). The *Trust* survey, which is the focus of our analysis, asked about staff's general experience of their working environment and perceived relationships with colleagues and management. Details and analysis of the COVID-19 surveys are contained in the online appendix, Section B. Importantly, the COVID-19 surveys do not present evidence of gendered differences in responses, indicating that the observed differences in the *Trust* survey are not attributable to pandemic circumstances or to a uniform difference in how male and female UN staff respond to work surveys.

We combined the twenty-eight *Trust* survey questions into three averaged indices covering perceptions of: peer relationships; relationship with management, supervisors, and supervision quality; and feedback and performance appraisals (online appendix, Table B5). Responses range from –3 (strongly disagree) to 3 (strongly agree), with 0 corresponding to neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Each index serves as a dependent variable for one of our models, and the main independent variable is respondents' self-reported gender. We estimate a linear model with standard errors clustered at the mission level and fixed effects for each mission. We include control variables at the individual level for respondents' age group (four categories from 25 to 65),⁴ contract type (permanent, fixed term, or temporary), and staff category (Professional+ or Field Service), as well as a control for whether the mission is a peacekeeping operation. The family duty station variable (a proxy for a lo-

²The UN also operates two logistics centers and a field-based resident coordinator system.

³This does not include national staff in UN field missions (Coleman 2024).

⁴Age group 18–24 was dropped as it only had one respondent.

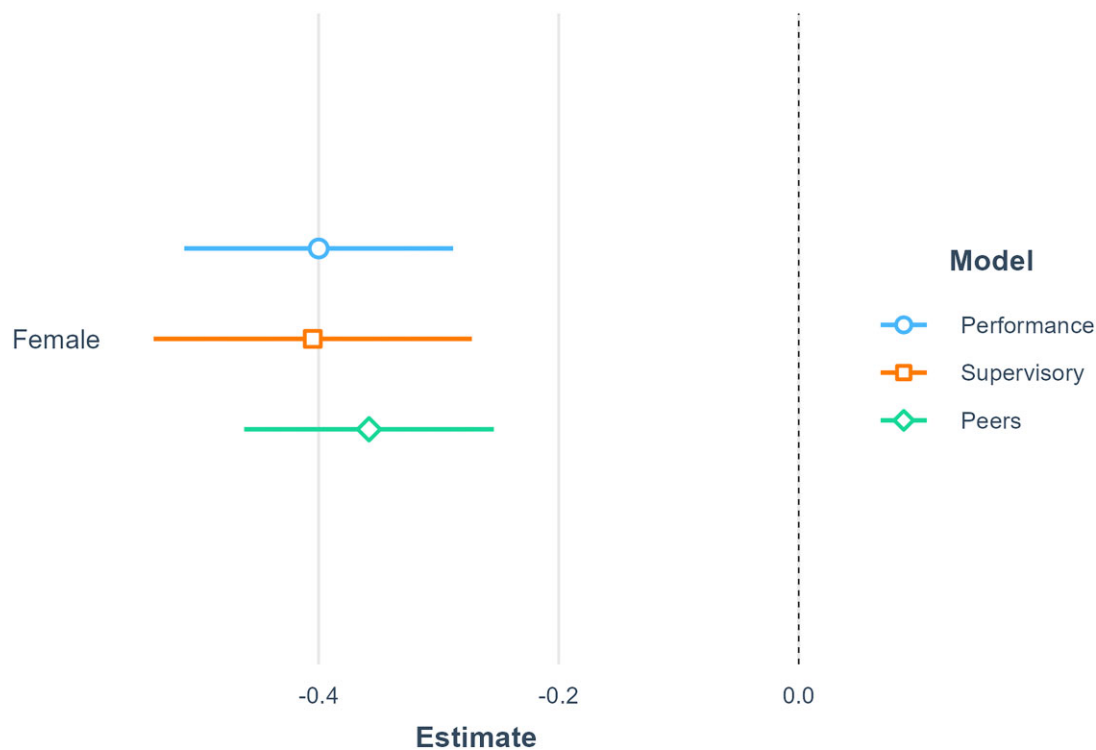


Figure 1. Coefficient plot for gender and trust survey. *Note:* Results in [online appendix, Table B1](#). 95 percent confidence intervals.

cation's risk) was dropped due to collinearity in the main specification, but the results are substantively unchanged ([online appendix, Table B2](#)).

As [Figure 1](#) illustrates, female UN field staff report worse experiences than their male colleagues across all the indices tested. On average, women are more likely to believe they do not receive useful feedback, think that performance is not adequately appraised, and report worse relationships with management, their immediate supervisor, and peers while also believing their supervisor to be less qualified and effective (results in [online appendix, Table B1](#)). The marginal effect of being a woman results in an average decrease of 0.4 points compared to men for the modal respondent.⁵ These effects are reflected in the descriptive data. The means of the peers, management, and performance indices are 1.51, 0.57, and 1.07, respectively, and women respondents report 0.47–0.56 point lower perceptions across the three indices, on average. Staff across age groups and Professional+ staff are more dissatisfied than staff in the oldest age group and Field Service staff (see [online appendix, Section B](#)). Disaggregating the supervisory index into three separate indices for perceptions of supervisory relationships, management relationships, and supervisor quality does not substantively change the results, nor does splitting the performance index into two indices on feedback and performance ([online appendix, Table B8](#)). The findings are remarkably consistent and indicative of gender-based differences in officials' experiences of working in UN field missions.

The point estimates and the significance of the coefficients for female respondents are consistent and robust to a

variety of specifications.⁶ The inclusion of mission fixed effects alleviates concerns that the results are driven by time-invariant mission-level characteristics, such as exposure to violence, duty station comfort, or personalities of mission leaders. This does not mean that these factors play no role, but their influence is unlikely to drive the results of the statistical analysis. Interestingly, women are primarily dissatisfied with routine, as opposed to crisis, interactions with their coworkers: as noted above, COVID-19 impact surveys for the same population produce no gendered effects ([online appendix, Section B](#)).

These findings confirm that IOs are no exception to the feminist institutionalist caution that the internal dynamics of organizations are often deeply gendered. In particular, “criticism of women’s ability to do the job”—which [Acker \(2012, 216\)](#) highlights as common in organizations in general—does not appear to be mitigated by the unique characteristics of the workforce of UN field missions. Elite status and self-selection into challenging missions do not seem to shield women from gendered supervision dynamics, though perhaps they contribute to the modestly better reported peer relations.

Gendered Dynamics in UN Missions

To probe the dynamics underlying the gender disparities evident in the *Trust* survey, we use the responses to open-ended questions in the *Trust* survey and complement these with

⁵Modal respondent is aged 45–54, holds a Field Service post, has a fixed-term contract in a peacekeeping operation, and works for the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).

⁶Cronbach’s Alpha tests are in the [online appendix, Table B7](#). Survey questions and indices for the dependent variables were treated as ordinal measures, and the ordered logistic regression results were consistent with the OLS results. Interacting gender and age ([online appendix, Table B3](#)) does not change the substantive results, but it highlights how younger staff, particularly women aged 25–44, are among the most dissatisfied across all three indices.

four additional sources of qualitative data. First, we identify relevant comments from two further internal UN surveys, a 2017 *Satisfaction* survey (UN 2017b) and a 2020 *Mobility* survey.⁷ Second, we draw on forty-six interviews conducted for projects on internal processes in UN peacekeeping missions which mentioned gendered dynamics (online appendix, Section C). Third, we use data from the UN Oral History archive, and fourth, we employ official UN documents and reports (online appendix, Section D). These different data types deepen our qualitative analysis and help us triangulate insights beyond the single *Trust* survey, revealing multifaceted gendered dynamics and patterns of concerns expressed over time and across a variety of sources. We discuss the dynamics undergirding each of the three *Trust* survey indices in turn.

Relationship with Peers

International staff in field locations are typically distant from their families and private social networks in their home countries, while also being separated from local communities by language, social barriers, and safety protocols (Autesserre 2010; Coleman 2020). Consequently, UN field missions are exceptionally tight-knit social and professional communities: “the mission is your life” (Di Razza 2020, 11). In this context, the gender-based differences in respondents’ evaluations of their peer relationships found in the *Trust* survey illustrate how the UN’s organizational culture in field locations worsens women’s work experiences.

Work intensity and isolation contribute to the frequent construction of field office communities as spaces of male solidarity. As the UN Ombudsman noted,

Some offices are reported to still have vestiges of an “old boys club” culture, which in itself is a hindrance to the full participation of women. This is especially true in some field missions, where the mix of military and civilian cultures may inject additional layers of a male-dominated culture and women staff members find themselves side-lined or assessed according to a different scale (UN 2016, 22).

A female civilian peacekeeping official echoed the critique of the UN as “a gigantic boys’ club” and suggested that men “protect each other ... [through] male networks.”⁸ In the *Trust* survey, a female respondent criticized male solidarity in recruitment processes: “[T]hey always cook something and have their own old boys’ clubs and their favorite people!” Male networks also create a perception among female officials that they are excluded from information flows: an internal UN audit found that female international staff in peacekeeping missions felt “significantly less positive about information-sharing” than their male colleagues (UN Office of Internal Oversight Services 2021, 12). In the *Satisfaction* survey, one respondent in the UN political mission in Iraq (UNAMI) noted that “it seems that women are being recruited for the number only, but are not being treated equally ... You can be the only woman in the department and be continuously excluded from information sharing, meetings, decision making process, etc.” Similarly, a respondent in the UN Support Office in Somalia (UNSOS) reported “a typical boys club mentality ... [where] qualified and successful women are not empowered or treated equally as male colleagues.”

Visibility as a woman in male-dominated spaces can translate into social scrutiny and behavior policing by peers, including by female colleagues. Margaret Anstee, the first woman to head a UN peacekeeping operation, had to contend with persistent gossip about her sex life (Standfield 2022). The former head of the UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG), Heidi Tagliavini (2013, para. 42), noted that in UN missions, “the dress check is usually merciless, especially from other women.” Similar dynamics affect staff beyond the leadership level, as a female national staff member reported: “I can be harassed because there are rumors that I am the girlfriend of the chief [senior manager]. Or I can be harassed because I don’t go out with men. Either way, I am harassed ... If you are friendly or not friendly, either way you are harassed.”⁹

Gender-based harassment, including sexual harassment, remains a concern for women in UN peace operations.¹⁰ A former national staff member of the UN mission in Liberia (UNMIL) noted, “Sexual harassment is frequent, that was obvious. Supervisors would harass staff members.”¹¹ In the *Satisfaction* survey, a UN-AU Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) respondent stated, “Serious measures have to be in place to curb this abuse of authority from the men folk,” while a UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) respondent commented, “My mission needs to tackle issues of harassment of women in particular.” A *Trust* survey respondent noted that “the lack of action against those who are found to be guilty of misconduct has the effect of eroding the trust of staff members particularly amongst women who are vulnerable to sexual harassment and SGBV [sexual and gender-based violence].”¹²

Blurred boundaries between work and leisure increase the risk of inappropriate behavior. The United Nations Dispute Tribunal (2020, 10) investigated allegations of misconduct at an after-work social gathering as workplace sexual harassment, ruling the case admissible because in the field location in question, staff “were required to live and work within a small compound ... without a clear separation between private life and their work environment.” Moreover, given an “institutional culture ... [that] has made ‘fitness for hardship’ a core requirement for the job,” complaining about life in the field, including any episodes of harassment, is often stigmatized as “weakness” (Di Razza 2020, 19–20). The tight-knit professional community across missions may also cause staff to feel that their future job prospects depend on preserving a reputation for “collegiality” and not being a “troublemaker.”

UN efforts to promote gender parity sometimes increase tensions between female and male staff in field missions. Some UN officials believe that gender parity in UN missions sometimes “stands in the way of meritocracy.”¹³ An internal UN study found that a significant minority of male staff believe that the UN’s drive to hire more women for civilian peacekeeping posts “compromised merit-based recruitment and delayed the process” (UN Office of Internal Oversight Services 2021, 20). Two male respondents in the *Trust* survey focused on recruitment: for one, “being a female staff brings all requirement criteria instead of ... making sure recruitment process brings the most qualified first”; the other

⁹Author’s interview, January 30, 2019.

¹⁰Author’s interview, January 31, 2019.

¹¹Author’s interview, November 18, 2018.

¹²Three additional female respondents and one respondent who preferred not to identify their gender commented on unsatisfactory responses to misconduct allegations without specifying the nature of the misconduct. No male respondent raised the issue.

¹³Author’s interview, January 31, 2020.

⁷We correct typos in comments where relevant. The *Mobility* survey was shared with us by the UNFSU. Its 3,357 respondents were not asked about their gender, making the data unusable for our statistical analysis.

⁸Author’s interview, March 22, 2021.

Table 1. Supervisor critiques in trust survey comments, by gender

Gender (percent)	Respondents	Substantive Comments	Nepotism	Abuse
Female	26.5	30.3	29.3	53.9
Prefer not to say/other	8.7	10.8	17.2	15.4
Male	64.8	58.9	53.5	30.8
Total number (count)	1,697	455	58	39

Note: Nepotism relates to manager or supervisor nepotism or favoritism. Abuse relates to manager or supervisor abuse, bullying, or harassment. Online appendix, Section B, includes coding information.

opined, “It seems men are discriminated when you are competing for a post against a woman.” In the *Satisfaction* survey, similar points were made by respondents from UNMIL (“We actively discriminate against men by favoring women in recruitment”) and UNMISS (“The UN needs to recruit people who are competent and stop this absurdity about national balance and gender”). In the *Mobility* survey, a male respondent commented that “I do not believe that the effect of the gender parity priority on male colleagues who also want to foster their careers with the UN has been properly looked at.” Moreover, in 2018, the UNFSU president argued that in the era of peacekeeping downsizing, gender considerations would lead to “discrimination” against men as individuals were allegedly “sent home for gender reasons” (UN Field Staff Union 2018, 62).

For female staff, these reactions create additional challenges in peer relations. Male colleagues may doubt their competence: “this women gender parity thing is killing us ... As a woman, I am so against that ... I want to be evaluated and picked because of my skills ... and not just because of my gender.”¹⁴ Some female staff also argue that gender parity rules have led some managers to omit women candidates prior to the final selection round to avoid having to hire them.¹⁵ As a *Satisfaction* survey respondent put it, the “policy on promoting women to leadership positions has led to the systematic exclusion of women on the basis of gender ... [from] shortlists and rosters for senior positions in order to appoint men.” In short, women’s negative perceptions of peer relationships occur in the context of patterns of male solidarity, increased risk of harassment, and backlash against gender parity initiatives.

Relationship with Management and Supervisors

Most UN missions are mandated to deliver life-saving support to populations threatened by conflict. Staff often understand themselves as engaged in the urgent pursuit of a noble cause. A female UN official in the UN Transition Group (UNTAG) in Namibia recalled being “willing to work long hours, to put up with so many things, because I really believed in it” (Dieye 1998, 2). The “things” with which officials may put up include gender-based abuse. Fabrizio Hochschild, a former deputy head of the UN Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), used “abusive language [and] demand[ed] telephone calls at late-night hours and weekends” and said “his office didn’t want women employees to get pregnant” (Heikkilä 2021, para. 6). He was eventually dismissed over staff members’ complaints, but some alleged that the UN delayed investigating his conduct for years because Hochschild’s work in difficult field locations had made him an “archetypal ‘hero’ in

the UN” (Heikkilä 2021, para. 10). Hochschild’s own excuse was that his “eagerness to deliver led some to see [him] as an overbearing and over-demanding supervisor” (Heikkilä 2021, para. 10). A *Trust* survey respondent warned that in general, “there are members of the leadership group who communicate aggressively, to the point of being disrespectful and in some case bullying those who are junior to them ... The mistake should not be made to overlook such behaviors and actions just because the work under the persons’ leadership has been accomplished.” While bullying affects employees of all genders, these dynamics are especially detrimental to women: As another *Trust* survey respondent noted, “Harassment and abuse of authority are slowly killing mission performance ... Women suffer more than men.”

The pattern of comments in the *Trust* survey supports this contention. As Table 1 shows, accusations of nepotism—the most frequent critique of supervisors—are voiced by respondents of all genders at a rate broadly proportional to their representation among those 455 respondents who made substantive comments. In contrast, 54 percent of comments about supervisor harassment, bullying, or abuse were made by female respondents, and an additional 15 percent came from respondents preferring not to indicate their gender. Men, who furnished 59 percent of all comments, accounted for only 31 percent of comments on supervisor abuse.

There is also a gendered construction of what a “dedicated” UN professional is. Missions’ “virtuous” goals are regularly used to validate all-encompassing work schedules that demand staff deprioritize their private lives (UN 2021, 18). This self-abnegation in service of work is often cast in gendered terms: “[m]acho managers who are hard on their employees are often even harder on themselves, and this self-sacrifice is another important element of masculine experience” (Donaldson 1991; cited in Linstead, Brewis, and Linstead 2005, 553). Women frequently face skepticism about two aspects of their dedication.

First, they can be perceived as less able to cope with “tough” conditions in the field, creating particular pressure on women to prove their resilience to their supervisors. Anstee (2011, 12) recalled that “women had to ... be ready to accept difficult and dangerous posts to demonstrate that their gender was not a drawback.” These attitudes persisted through the 2010s, when the all-female leadership team of UNAMI was praised for “defying assumptions that women are unfit for—or unwilling to assume—service in the toughest countries” (Papagiotti and von Chamier 2020, para. 1), suggesting that such assumptions remained widespread. In 2018, the UNFSU urged the UN to “recognize certain environments ... which are by nature not attractive for one gender or the other and exempt them from the gender parity imposition,” essentially calling for deprioritizing gender parity efforts in “dangerous” locations.

Second, women may be seen as less willing to make the personal sacrifices that are considered necessary—at least

¹⁴ Author’s interview, January 31, 2019.

¹⁵ Author’s conversation, January 2019.

for women—to work in the field successfully. In particular, the perception remains that women “have to choose between family and peacekeeping” (UN 2021, 18), especially since the UN does not support its staff in balancing work and family commitments: “As you progress in your career and decide to have a family ... DPKO [Department of Peacekeeping Operations] will no longer be interested since most posts are non-family duty stations.”¹⁶ Consequently, women’s careers are more likely to be considered temporary, ending with them leaving the UN or, for the fortunate, securing a headquarters position: “I had a friend ... she was in Liberia, Haiti, DRC, and Afghanistan, and she finally got Geneva. She was 41 or 42, and it was now or never if she wants a family and children.”¹⁷ Some supervisors respond by investing less in women staff: “Priority is given to men when it comes for career development and international trainings ... It is assumed that women ‘would not want to attend anyways,’ which is not true” (*Satisfaction* survey). One team leader complained that the person they recruited “showed up 17 weeks pregnant—she left at 7 months.”¹⁸ A female national staff member in another mission commented: “Pregnancy is a frustration ... It’s aggravating to have a staff who is pregnant [because] towards the end you can’t fly in planes—they let me know that this was frustrating to them ... Bosses get irritated that you can’t use a woman.”¹⁹ A *Satisfaction* survey respondent summed up the dynamic: “Women with children get very little respect in DPKO. They are seen as less loyal than men with children.” Since working in UN missions and having a family are constructed as incompatible for women—but less so for men—female staff are more likely to resign from field jobs (see *Giaque, Anderfuhren-Biget, and Varone 2019* on the effects of poor work-life balance and negative relationships at work on IO staff turnover). This, in turn, leaves a gender gap in the UN’s leadership pipeline. Alan Doss, who served in senior positions in several UN peace operations, recalled:

Younger female staffers were disproportionately likely to leave missions for other UN assignments based in North America or Europe—they provided better prospects for balancing family and professional life. These factors worked to limit the number of women in the middle ranks of the staff, which in turn reduced the pool of female applicants who could be selected to move up the ranks (*Doss 2020*, 265).

Yet this path is not possible for all female officials, and, consequently, women’s share of resignations at middle management levels is disproportionately high.²⁰ The dearth of family duty stations and potentially unsupportive colleagues or supervisors decreases the likelihood of mid-career women returning to the field. A gender advisor whose husband accompanied her to the field to care for their child was publicly told by a senior male colleague after a presentation on gender equity, “the real question is, what gender is your husband?”²¹ Female supervisors remain rare in UN missions, which may affect the experiences of women staff in junior positions.

Feedback and Performance Appraisal

Facing, on average, worse relations with supervisors and peers, women may be more concerned that their competencies are overlooked and their contributions undervalued. In the *Satisfaction* survey, the UNSOS respondent cited above on “boys club mentality” continued: “As a woman you have to fight to be able to do your job ... [W]omen have been demoralized and pushed away after years of male mentality abuse.” Even where women make it to supervisory posts, they may not receive positive feedback on their managerial practice: an UNMISS official reported that at “supervisor level ... suggestions coming from a woman are still a big issue.”

Women staff may find their performance constrained by gender-based perceptions of appropriate work assignments. For example, in Cambodia, when a “human-rights officer [who] was very strong-willed, a young woman” affronted government officials, an equally young male colleague “was asked initially to go help her out because the work was so tough” and eventually replaced her because “[t]here was also a question of her safety” (*Banbury 1998*, 7–11). Gendered protectionism can deprive women of opportunities to demonstrate their competence.²² In Namibia, when a female UNTAG staff member proposed working in a township outside the capital, “[e]verybody was saying ‘No, you cannot give such a position to a woman; it is a dangerous place’” (*Dieye 1998*, 3). She ultimately secured the posting despite the resistance and turned her gender into an advantage when monitoring the local police, who “didn’t take too seriously a woman” and made her “job easier because [they], themselves, would tell me what they were doing ... just because they were being condescending” (*Dieye 1998*, 8). However, not all female officials succeed at overcoming skepticism about their ability to excel on challenging assignments, and those who lack opportunities to demonstrate competence may subsequently perceive feedback on their performance as unfair or unhelpful.

Furthermore, women field staff are sometimes channeled into work in which femininity is considered an advantage. A blatant example occurred in Namibia, where UN “radio programs were produced by a ... support staff woman ... [who] had a rather deep, sexy voice” (*Eckhard 1999*, 12–3). More subtly, women staff may be encouraged to work on “gender” files. One official commented that “we needed a woman because it’s a high level of sexual violence.”²³ Where missions treat “the operational value of women [a]s dependent on their sex-difference” (*Holmes 2019*, 66), and women see themselves channeled to less prestigious “feminine” tasks, they are more likely to find feedback and performance appraisals out of sync with their contribution.

Women in leadership positions face particular barriers to being perceived as competent in male-dominated field environments. In the *Satisfaction* survey, a UNAMID respondent noted, “In spite of all the sensitization on gender, females—especially females in supervisory and leadership posts—continue to be bullied and not respected by the menfolk ... I am tired of always fighting for my rights as a female staff member in a supervisory position.” An additional barrier to female leaders’ recognition is the so-called “double bind” (*Teele, Kalla, and Rosenbluth 2018*): women may lose social capital if they are seen as “neglecting” traditional family roles in favor of careers. A female deputy head of the UN mission in the DRC, for example, “did not benefit from the credibility, power, and influence usually attached

¹⁶Author’s communication with a former UN official, June 4, 2021.

¹⁷Author’s interview, January 28, 2019.

¹⁸Author’s interview, June 11, 2019.

¹⁹Author’s interview, July 23, 2019.

²⁰Figure A1 in the online appendix.

²¹Author’s communication with a UN official, August 3, 2022.

²²For similar dynamics among military peacekeepers, see *Holmes (2019)*, *Karim and Beardsley (2017)*, and *Newby and Seabag (2021)*.

²³Author’s interview, June 14, 2019.

Table 2. Criticism in trust survey comments, by gender

Gender (percent)	Comments	Accountability	Underperformance	Rewards
Female	30.3	38.8	47.8	32.4
Prefer not to say/other	10.8	22.5	13.0	8.8
Male	58.9	38.8	39.1	58.8
Total number (count)	455	49	23	34

Note: Only substantive comments included. Accountability reflects comments that demand more supervisor accountability. Underperformance refers to comments on underperformance not being addressed, and rewards refers to comments on excellence not being rewarded. Online appendix, Section B, includes coding information.

to such a rank ... because she was a woman, and because she did not have a traditional family with children, something that may have redeemed her in her male colleagues' eyes" (Autesserre 2010, 218–9). Furthermore, the so-called "glass cliff" phenomenon, whereby members of underrepresented groups are appointed to top positions during crises and then blamed for failure, affects both racial minorities in UN field missions (Oksamytna and von Billerbeck 2024) and female leaders. Johnson (2014, 112), a female SRSG appointed to lead UNMISS during a crisis, "knew that she would be the one accused before the Security Council if [the mission] failed."

Overall, "women in peace missions face more skepticism and suspicion than men in the same jobs" (Tagliavini 2013, §12). Karin Landgren (2020, 39), who led UN missions in Liberia, Burundi, and Nepal, confirmed:

Men also react to and register women's leadership less, or less well, than they do the leadership of other men. I recently read a friend's memoir in which he speaks glowingly of dozens of male colleagues, who are variously brilliant, energetic or collegial. Women are all but absent from this book, and when they appear, it is largely without the fulsome adjectives.

Women's dissatisfaction with feedback and appraisals may be compounded by the perception that men manage to evade accountability in male-dominated organizations. As Table 2 shows, women and men respondents' share of *Trust* survey comments about excellence not being sufficiently rewarded line up with their share of all substantive comments, at about 30 and 58 percent of 455 substantive comments, respectively. In contrast, women are overrepresented among comments that call for greater supervisor accountability—notably by providing team members more credible opportunities to review supervisors—and those who argue that underperformance is insufficiently penalized. Women account for 39 percent of comments on the need for increased accountability and 48 percent of the comments on underperformance not being addressed. Women are thus more likely to note that others' poor performance is not detected or penalized. This is compatible with exclusion from male networks: a UNAMID respondent explicitly argued that "[t]he boys club mentality is still there, and the management-leadership level seems to have no qualms in covering up for their male colleague's wrongdoing." This finding is supported by the disaggregated survey questions related to accountability: The negative effects of being female are larger for questions on accountability and addressing underperformance than they are for the question on rewarding high performance.²⁴ Analyzing the

survey comments using an STM demonstrates that women discuss transparency at higher rates than men, with implications for their assessment of feedback and their relationship with management.²⁵ Women also use different words than men when discussing the same topic, emphasizing accountability, mandates, rules, and addressing problems, whereas men focus on organizations, stakeholders, and security.²⁶

In short, the combination of women's perceptions that they are not given opportunities to demonstrate their full capabilities, that supervisors (and often male colleagues) are unaccountable, and that female leadership is resisted produce women's belief that feedback and performance appraisals are not fair or constructive.

Conclusions

UN missions constitute one of the largest field-based international bureaucracies. While scholars have noted gender gaps in IOs in general and the UN specifically, we offer a systematic, mixed-methods investigation of how female and male officials in UN field missions experience their work environment. Women's experiences are consistently worse than men's. In an internal staff survey, women reported worse perceptions of the usefulness of feedback and performance appraisals as well as more negative relationships with management, supervisors, and peers compared to men.

Analysis of the survey comments, interviews, and archives demonstrates how gendered dynamics within field missions contribute to divergent workplace experiences for male and female staff. Male networks, the risk of gender-based and sexual harassment, lack of accommodation for those with family responsibilities, and stereotypes about women's performance drive some of the observed differences in male and female experiences. With these findings, we have contributed to three literatures: on gender and international institutions, on organizational culture in international bureaucracies more broadly, and on gender dynamics in field locations.

We propose three main directions for further research. First, we recommend widening the scope of inquiry to compare gender dynamics in field-based components of other IOs as well as NGOs. For example, the World Food Program was reported to have a pattern of sexual harassment in field locations that some women felt pressure to tolerate in order to not appear "difficult or delicate," a problem that leader-

²⁴The effect for holding people accountable for women is -0.52 , and it is -0.32 for whether underperformance is addressed, whereas it is -0.28 for whether high performance is rewarded. See online appendix, Table B9, for full results.

²⁵The STM was fit using the *stm* package in R. The effect of being female is positive and statistically significantly different from male respondents for Topic 5, which centers on transparency and favoritism. This correlation between being female and mentioning words associated with transparency is captured in the online appendix, Table B11 and Figure B1.

²⁶In Topic 9 and Topic 10 in the STM fit based on survey comment content, women and men discuss the same topics using different words (Figure B2 in the online appendix).

ship seemed to deprioritize because of urgent demands of their emergency work (Jeong 2021). If UN missions' unique features, such as the influence of military cultures, affect their gender dynamics, comparative studies can help disentangle the effects of such idiosyncratic features from the more general aspects of working in the field.

Second, the effects of gendered differences among UN field workers on organizational outcomes deserve further investigation. Internally, the (lack of) perceived organizational support and dissatisfaction with workplace social relationships—factors that Giauque and Varone (2018) show to impact employees' commitment to IOs—may influence female officials' motivation. Externally, the persistence of gender inequalities within field missions may undermine the UN's legitimacy, including as a norm advocate. Additional research could illuminate how perceptions that the UN does not itself follow the norms it promotes (see von Billerbeck 2017), including the gender equality norm, impact the credibility of its advocacy on gender and other issues.

Third, an intersectional investigation could probe the interactions between gender and race, age, or sexual orientation in international bureaucracies.²⁷ An investigation into the experiences of staff facing discrimination based on gender, including beyond the gender binary, and other identity characteristics would represent a long-overdue contribution to research on international bureaucracies.

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Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *International Studies Quarterly* online.

Data availability

The data underlying this article are available on the ISQ Dataverse at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/isq>.

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²⁷We briefly discuss the relationship between gender and age in Section B of the the online appendix.

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