

**Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe:
U.S. Helsinki Commission**

Helsinki on the Hill Podcast

“Conflict Is Not Gender Neutral: A Military Perspective”

Guests:

**Colonel Katherine Lee,
New Zealand Defence Force**

**Lieutenant Colonel Diana Morais,
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Host:

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TIERSKY: Hello, and welcome back to Helsinki on the Hill, a series of conversations hosted by the United States Helsinki Commission on human rights and comprehensive security in Europe and beyond. I'm your host, Alex Tiersky.

Listeners, we see our role here on the podcast as helping our audience explore issues of human rights, war, and peace. Today, we're going to focus on something that lies directly at the intersection of all of these issues, a topic that is near and dear to the heart of members of the U.S. Helsinki Commission, and that issue is the role of women in peace and security.

Now, some of you out there may be well aware that when we use the term, quote, "women, peace, and security," many of us are talking about or referring to an evidence-based policy framework that's now some 20 years old. It's been institutionalized across the landscape of international organizations from the United Nations to the Organization for Security and Cooperation Europe – the OSCE – that is a focus of this podcast.

Well, in today's episode, we want to give you an entry point into this conversation through the experiences and expertise of two guests who are incredibly well placed to help us understand what the women, peace, and security agenda is all about, where it comes from, and where it's going.

In this episode, we'll be talking with two senior active duty female military officers who are part of the very prestigious Halifax International Security Forum's Peace with Women Fellowship. Let me welcome them on the podcast now.

Our first guest, purely in alphabetical order, is Colonel Katherine Lee from the New Zealand Defence Force.

LEE: It's really great to be here. Thank you, Alex.

TIERSKY: Thanks for joining us. And, also on the microphone with us today is Lieutenant Colonel Diana Morais from the Portuguese Ministry of National Defense.

Lieutenant Colonel, thanks for joining us.

MORAIS: Good morning, Alex. Thank you for having us.

TIERSKY: Terrific. Well, I would love for our listeners just to get to know a little bit about you. Could you, perhaps, introduce yourselves, very briefly? Tell us a little bit about your military careers. Perhaps we could start with Colonel Lee.

LEE: Thanks, Alex. I'm Colonel Kate Lee and I'm in the New Zealand army and I currently work in Army General Staff, which is our army headquarters in our capital in Wellington.

So I've been in the army for almost 29 years. I started off – I'm a signals officer by background. I progressed through a number of different roles in the signals corps. I've done a

number of staff roles. I've been in recruiting, HR, the CO of a training unit, and I've had a couple of deployments both with the United Nations in Timor-Leste but also with UNTSO in the Middle East. That's just a few of the highlights with – for what's been a really amazingly enjoyable career. I've been so fortunate.

TIERSKY: It sounds incredibly fascinating.

Lieutenant Colonel Morais, please.

MORAIS: So I am currently the gender advisor to my minister of national defense and I'm also the chair of the NATO Committee on Gender Perspectives. I've started that position in June this year. I've been in the army for 25 years. I'm an engineer officer by trade. I've been – in my junior ranks I've been a platoon commander. I've been a company commander. I was deployed to Lebanon on a United Nations mission, and as my – as a senior officer, I did logistics, human resource, and now I'm doing – fortunately, I'm only doing gender, which is great.

TIERSKY: (Laughs.) Well, wow. Quite different backgrounds that you have. But both of you, clearly, very – extremely distinguished careers behind you and a very promising future. So, again, thank you again for your service and for being with us today on the podcast.

Colonel Lee, perhaps I could ask you. I mentioned to our listeners that you are both a part of this somewhat mysterious but very prestigious fellowship. You were selected. Maybe you could tell us a little bit about it.

LEE: That's right. So we are 12 women leaders and I would say probably we all agree leaders first and, obviously, we're all women as well. So 12 of us from all around the world from democratic nations, from NATO and partner nations, which New Zealand is one. This fellowship takes us on a journey of about three weeks before the Halifax Forum, which concludes for us in Halifax through a number of professional engagements on security topics, but also broader than that, because we acknowledge that there's an intersection of many different topics which influence and which, I guess, yeah, affect and influence the security environment.

So we've come together. We're on this trip. We're meeting with amazing people across from Washington, D.C., to San Francisco, and to Ottawa, and now in Toronto to meet with people from military, security, and industry to understand how the confluence of all these different elements come together. And it's been an amazing experience.

But I think most of all we all agree that meeting each other, 12 women from all across the world coming together, finding out what we have in common and what the differences are and just, you know, that connection, that chemistry, has been remarkable.

TIERSKY: That sounds like an incredible experience.

Let me ask, Lieutenant Colonel Morais, why were you interested in being a part of this fellowship? Why did you apply? What brought you into it?

MORAIS: Well, we don't have many opportunities to be in a group of 12 senior female officers back home or in any of our countries. So I think that was my first thoughts. So I have to meet this group of women. I get to share the challenges I've been facing throughout my career and, plus, I think it will be really interesting. I knew we would be speaking about a wide range of topics regarding peace and security, and as future leaders in the armed forces we really need to have this comprehensive understanding of what security means and what are the challenges that we face.

So I thought it would be a really good opportunity to address that and to be exposed to that topics and make me think a little bit more about it, and I think, yes, it would be a great opportunity. So I applied it and, fortunately, I managed to come and it has been a really awesome experience, as Kate mentioned.

TIERSKY: It's really striking to me that you say, you know, this is such – both of you have insisted on what an exceptional opportunity it is to get together with a group of leaders who happen to be female and that is such a rare opportunity. Your male counterparts, obviously, would not make the same statement. They have plenty of opportunities to be together. And so I guess I want to move the conversation into talking a little bit about some of the challenges that leaders who happen to be female in the armed forces are facing in your own countries and how this looks kind of across the landscape of the various fellows who are part of your cohort.

Why is it so important to raise up female voices of leadership in the military establishments of your countries and in democracies, as a whole?

LEE: Well, where to begin, because I hardly know how to answer that because there's – on an individual level why this is so important and I think, firstly, it's around knowing that you're not alone and that you've got – and that we've all had some similar experiences, while acknowledging also that we're not a homogenous group.

So one thing that's come up for me is just because we are a group of women doesn't mean that one of us can speak for all women, and I think there's a – there can be a tendency to do that. So it's important to recognize that we don't speak for all women and part of the – so part of the reason why it's more important to have more women around the table is to make sure that we recognize that there are many different perspectives even in the group of women that we are, and that's come out really loud and clear for me, that the more women there are the more perspectives that we hear and that's really a part of the women, peace, and security agenda is, obviously, around participation of women but also understanding the perspectives – the different gender perspectives and I think that's come really clearly from an individual level.

From a higher level, from, you know, our organization and military organizations and beyond, having women's perspective is absolutely essential. We know that women in conflict are generally more marginalized than men, and they need to be represented and their perspective needs to be understood to ensure that we're meeting their needs and that's still – it's still not a ubiquitous – I guess we're still not in a place where that's occurring.

MORAIS: And to add to what Kate just said, so the armed forces across all NATO members and partner nations are still male-dominated institutions. So the average percentage of women in NATO countries it's 11 percent – data from 2019. So I think one of the things really important of having initiatives like this, and I always say this back home, that I tell this to the little girls you cannot be what you cannot see.

So if little girls in our countries they don't see women in leadership positions and being able to do whatever they want, they won't make that choice, because it's easy to say that women are allowed to do whatever choice they do but what we should question ourselves is are our choices free or are we being – our unconscious biases and the perceptions are leading us to make some choices, either if it's personal or professional choices. And, definitely, if you ask a girl if she wants to be in military when she grows up probably she will never have thought about it. And we must start by that and, definitely, we need to show the society – the armed forces need to show the society that armed forces are a profession of choice, an employer of choice, and that you can be a woman or a man and you can join the armed forces.

We need this diversity of people to make our armed forces more effective. As Kate said, we need all these perspectives of these – all these different people to make us better. So it's really important that we show ourselves even that sometimes we don't like that, being on the spotlight. But it's – I see this as a necessary thing to help others to get where I got.

LEE: And I think at a really micro level as an – you know, on an individual level this fellowship's also important for me and my family, and Diana and I both have daughters and I have a son as well, and I know my daughter thinks and knows that she can do anything and she's immensely proud of what I do and she sees what I do and the engagements that I have with these amazing women and she knows that she can be that.

But I'm also raising a son who knows that this is what women are capable of and that not only do they deserve a seat at the table and to fully participate, but that it's actually the right thing to do as well. And so I feel like it's – you know, it's also my job at a family level and as a friend and as a mother and as a sister to be a really good role model as well.

TIERSKY: Let's build on that, if we could. On top of the hugely important role modeling that you all are doing, you mentioned a couple of times that the – having additional women around the table adds to the range of perspectives that are considered. I'm wondering whether you could point to kind of specific experiences that you all have had, where either you've looked around the table and you said, boy, I'm the only one. That's maybe not so good. Or just it struck you that maybe a decision was made that might have gone differently if there had been a greater variety of perspectives around the table.

MORAIS: So I can give you a really simple example where that makes sense. Like, in my country in the army we were discussing the uniform regulation, and if you only have – if you have a working group discussing or drafting the new proposal of the army uniform regulation, for sure it will be difficult to understand what are the needs of a woman for instance, when she's pregnant. Or even in a day-to-day situation you really need to have these different perspectives

because we all have different needs. And also our policies they will have different impacts on this diverse population that they are impacting.

So unless you have these – you acknowledge these during the planning or drafting your strategies and policies, they will not be as effective as they should or you can have really an issue, for instance, with the uniform. So it's really from – I always give this example of the uniform regulations because I think it's really easy to understand and a really simple thing.

TIERSKY: Sure.

MORAIS: But you can – you can broaden this to everything you do.

TIERSKY: Sure. Colonel Lee?

LEE: It's really difficult to have sort of a revisionist approach to know how things might have been different if we'd had a broader perspective. But the evidence is really clear. I mean, you can read anywhere the evidence shows us that more a gender diverse decision-making, better decisions can be made. And, certainly, in my organization, in New Zealand Defence Force, there's a mandated requirement to have 30 percent gender representation on senior decision-making boards, and so that's – and that's starting to make its way through the organization and I think we will start to see the real benefits of that.

And even the deliberate requirement to do that and to make good decisions about who is sitting around a table making decisions on career boards and senior decision boards in itself, I think, is a really positive move forward. I think one of the reflections I would have is that, you know, often we're in a room with only men and it's normal for us, and when you find it's in the reverse, like, we were walking in the halls of the Pentagon, 12 of us in our service dress, and you could see the heads turning. It wasn't a normal situation to be in. (Laughter.) But it was – you know, so you could see some people – some men may have been thinking a little differently.

But if I might, just a little story from that time, which was just so lovely. We were walking out of the Pentagon and there was a woman who was in civilian clothes. She might have been going out that night. I'm not sure. But she sort of said to a couple of us, oh, my goodness, you have made my day. She said, I'm a Marine, and you just don't see this every day. And you could see she walked away with a spring in her step, and maybe that made a difference to somebody and that they can see that this is possible.

TIERSKY: That's terrific. I can only imagine the turning heads, having walked those halls myself.

Lieutenant Colonel Morais, let me turn back to you. You both have shared your personal experiences and what it means to you personally, and then Colonel Lee has just kind of entered into the realm of how do we change how decisions are made. And I think a lot of this – a lot of the progress that's been made in recent years is at least partially to do with this kind of broader international agenda of women, peace, and security. And I want to ask you a little bit more, if

you can tell us a little bit about, you know, what has the last 20 years of women, peace, and security looked like? What does it mean? And how are you a part of it?

MORAIS: So when the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 was approved in the year 2000, so 20, 21 years ago, it was the first time that the Security Council, which is still a male environment, acknowledged after – acknowledged that women do have a role when it comes to peace and security.

So after the year 2000 and other related resolutions were approved – there are 10 right now – and each – even security organization – international, regional organizations start – and national, they started developing what we call the action plans. You have national action plans that tell you how you should implement in your country the women, peace, and security agenda. You have NATO, OSCE, EU. They all have their national action plans.

So I would say that after 21 years the institutional framework is set. So we have a strong institutional framework with the Security Council resolutions and all the action plans. But what we've been discussing and even during our fellowship is that though you have your framework in place, there is a lack of, I would say, accountability because we don't know actually what has been implemented and what is the progress of the actions that are setting those action plans. We do have the leadership's support, which is really important, specifically in the political level. But as you go down in your organization, and we talked many times about middle management, there is a blockage there.

So even if you have leadership support, you have to have – in your institution, in your organization, you have to have everyone on board. You have to understand what does it mean to implement women, peace, and security, what does it mean to integrate gender perspective or mainstream gender, if you prefer this – mainstream gender in everything that you do in your organization.

And in my personal opinion I think what can be the game changer, having the institutional framework set, the leadership's support, you need to have education and training. People need to understand what does it mean to mainstream gender and how they can do it in their daily work because everyone can do that. And when you have this and accountability, because if nothing happens, which is normally the case – OK, you have an action plan. NATO has just revised its women, peace, and security action plan in the ministerial in October.

So, for me, the key for success is education and training because we all need to understand the concept. We all need to know what is this integrating gender perspective, and then accountability.

I think that's what's missing, so we go – when we are 20 years from now we are not still in the same place as we are now.

TIERSKY: Mmm hmm. Mmm hmm.

Colonel Lee, Lieutenant Colonel Morais just mentioned – she let us behind the curtain, in a sense, and said that this has been an issue you all have been discussing together, and I wonder whether you could reflect on, you know, how you and your fellows are talking to each other about this issue.

In particular, what Lieutenant Colonel Morais just kind of ended with, which is, we don't want to be in the same place in 20 years as we are 20 years after this landmark U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325 as the number that laid out for the first time this women, peace, and security agenda.

As you're gathering your thoughts, actually, I should mention for our listeners' sake that this issue of accountability that you mentioned, Lieutenant Colonel, is absolutely crucial to members of the Helsinki Commission. In particular, Senator Shaheen, who was behind the Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017, which, I think, led to the first national action plan in the United States. So I think it's something that's very near and dear to her heart.

But let me throw it to either of you. If you can talk a little bit about kind of how you – the various fellows or, let's say, the different nationalities represented, are your experiences very similar? Are they very different from each other? Is progress even everywhere or are there different levels of progress in different places?

LEE: That's a really difficult one, I guess, because we've all been talking as individuals from our own individual perspectives and we're all at different levels and have had different experiences in our organizations. So I think it would be fair to say that some of the discussions that we've had have been quite new and nascent for some and others, because of the roles that we've had, it might be a little bit more top of mind for us.

But it would be fair to say that we've all had really, really good deep conversations about this, and as you would expect, when you get 12 people from different parts of the – you know, different nationalities that we all have – we all come from a slightly different perspective.

But what is really important and what we have all noticed is the way we communicate with each other our different perspectives is really kind and with empathy and with curiosity, and I think that's the really important thing and that is why we've had some really, really good conversations.

But I think if, looking at where – you know, how do we make sure in 20 years' time we've actually made progress, I think one of the things I hear just generally is that we're doing really well and that we have achieved a lot. And if you do look back in history in terms of gender equity and women's rights we, certainly, have come a long way. I think it's really important that we don't declare victory and we make sure that we keep pressure on, we keep progressing forward, and we don't stop talking about this.

I know talking about gender equity, women's participation, women, peace, and security, may get tiresome for some, and I'm not talking about anyone in particular. It just feels like it – are we still talking about this? Are we not there yet? And I would say no and we need to keep

going, and I think it's really important that the conversation is still had at really senior levels and we keep checking ourselves and make sure are we doing the next thing that we need to do, and make sure that we continue to drive forward.

MORAIS: And I would add to what Kate said. So from what I've seen in – at NATO we do – we have a summary of national reports where we ask all NATO members and partner nations what has been the progress of the implementing women, peace, and security agenda, and, of course, it has been progress and there are some countries that may be a little bit ahead than others.

But what Kate said, I think, it's really important. First, we cannot take things for granted and I think the world is showing us that, and we cannot take for granted that if we have reached some place on gender equality or if we are getting better that that cannot – we cannot have a backlash, because we can.

But also I think it is important, and, you know, I work as a gender advisor and I always say this, and Kate knows, so gender equality and women, peace, and security it's doing the right thing, right. It's not – we don't need to have to tell why. It's just because it's the right thing to do.

But we also have to be smart and we have to tell the organization where we are working and look at the outcome of that organization. It can be a corporate or a government organization or the armed forces, and you have to look at the – to the outcome of that organization and show them how they can be better if they are more equal and more diverse and inclusive.

You will be better in your outcome, in your core business, if you do it. So I try to do that all the time and it's important that people acknowledge that. Even at NATO we are now discussing the new strategic concept and we are really hoping that the new strategic concept at NATO will integrate [gender] perspectives. So that will be a huge victory for us.

TIERSKY: I love this idea of showing the concrete benefits, that it's not just this kind of theoretical construct but that it really will lead to a better outcome in very real-world terms. Let me ask you kind of a final broad question, if I could, to the both of you.

Are you optimistic for the future in this set of issues? Are you optimistic on whether it's gender equality or the broader women, peace, and security agenda? And, Colonel Lee, I think you very movingly said we should not declare victory. I would add yet at the end of that sentence, perhaps. What does victory look like? When will we – when will we know that we've reached that point where we can declare victory?

So let me start with Lieutenant Colonel Morais, if I could.

MORAIS: So, again, as a gender advisor, if I'm not an optimistic person I couldn't do my job. (Laughter.) So I should start by saying this. So I am really – I'm really optimistic and positive. But I do know there is a lot of work to do, either at home at my national level or even

at NATO. But I think, like I've told you, we now have the leadership on board. I have that in Portugal and I have that in NATO, which, for me, it's really important.

So we need to have the experts like me working on gender doing our job, making sure that we have the leadership – continue to have the leadership support and we have to – I always say this – to move beyond words and to actions.

So all the policies – the main policies – and strategies have to mainstream gender. So from that, everything goes on the right way. It means if you integrate gender in your – what is the main goal mission of your organization, from that everything will follow. This is my optimistic version of it. (Laughs.) Also, but again, you need to educate people. People need to understand because, to be honest, I often hear that gender is a – it's a women's issue and people don't understand what it is implementing women, peace, and security because we are talking about gender equality. But if we talk about women, peace, and security, so conflicts is not gender neutral. Peace and security are not gender neutral. And we need to acknowledge that to make sure that we'll have sustainable peace because, like I told you, if we don't address the different needs of the population, if we don't address the gender threats that we have facing, we are not – we won't be able to have the best response to our adversaries and to protect the populations that we are seeking to protect.

So this is – this is really important. I think we need to be optimistic. We need to continue with our hard work. We need to continue to have leadership on board and education and training.

MORAIS: I really think the experts or the subject matter experts – that's the gender advisors – need to continue to do their hard work, advising their leadership on how they can mainstream gender across the organization institution that they belong, and to add to this, if you have all people in your organization educated so they can mainstream gender across their – throughout their work and then to add this – and to my final point, you add to this monitoring, reporting, and evaluation and accountability.

TIERSKY: And accountability.

MORAIS: It's like kind of a cycle, but accountability is key because people need to understand that they will be held accountable if they don't comply with what is decided at the highest level of their organization.

MORAIS: But I'm being really optimistic. (Laughter.)

TIERSKY: I was going to say what I hear from you is optimism, yes. You've given us a lot of food for thought on what is required to make progress, some specific pathways there, starting and maybe ending with accountability, making it – making it real in terms of how leaders implement this.

Not so much of a sense yet of what victory looks like. Colonel Lee, take us to your final thoughts on kind of where we are, where we're going, and when we know we've gotten there.

LEE: (Laughs.) OK. I, too, am an optimist because I think when you're in this – when you're in this business you have to be, and I think it's really important to be as well. And so I think – if I can touch briefly on why we do this – and I think Diana's point is really important – it's the right thing to do.

And from my organization's perspective, in New Zealand Defence Force we are a values-driven organization. So we should live and we do live by our values. And to be a good comrade and to be committed to each other, to have integrity, all of that is really important. So that's part of the reason.

It's really important that we ensure that we have our women, peace, and security agenda and to make sure that we have gender equality as a values – it's all about our values so and it's a way that we can represent it in a way that is meaningful to our people.

From a more operational perspective, really picked up in the last few weeks on our trip is that gender – you know, just about everything that's security related has a gendered impact, from climate change – we know that it is gendered, so women and men are impacted differently

We talk – we've talked a lot about cyber misinformation and disinformation. It is really important that we understand the gender perspective of mis- and disinformation, for example. So those are some of the reasons why it is really, really important. From a – you know, when can we declare victory and what does success look like, well, I don't think we should ever put a pin in it and say we've declared victory, and I know that sounds – maybe sounds a little pessimistic.

But I don't think as professional military operators we would ever declare victory on anything and we do that because it's important to keep pressure on and we will know more and learn more as we go and we just must keep continuing to understand better what we can do better.

What I can say is that in New Zealand in our Defence Force we have recently signed up to the U.N. Women's Empowerment Principles, for example, and it is a really important, I guess, signal that we are committed to making sure that we are looking at the issues and dealing with them in the right way. And when you publicly say that you are signed up to something, you know, you are committing to making sure that you are auditable and that you are going to follow through.

Likewise, our organization, our NZDF, has agreed to adopt gender mainstreaming as a policy method, and I'm so excited by that and we are going to make sure that we have a tool – a gender mainstreaming tool – that underpins everything we do from strategy development to, you know, structures to infrastructure to uniforms, which we've already started doing but in a more structured way, which means then we will be able to measure our – you know, our success.

So I am buoyed and optimistic, but I am always – and I’m always looking at the things that we need to do better and I think – I guess I would also say gender equality is – it’s not about women. It’s about all genders. It is also a men’s issue because men – you know, men benefit from gender equality and they face specific gender issues, and we need to make sure that we are looking at the broad spectrum of issues that face all genders. And I think it’s really helpful if we involve all genders in the discussion because I think that will help us succeed as well.

MORAIS: Can I – can I add something, Alex?

TIERSKY: Please. Of course.

MORAIS: So I really think you cannot say you have achieved gender equality throughout the world. But you do – you do need to celebrate small victories. That’s what I do. So you just mentioned the U.S. when it approved the 2017 Act. That was a small victory and we do need to celebrate those victories because – and also – and I try to do that in my work – you need to have tangible goals in order to have small victories, and if we keep going with these small victories I am sure we will have a huge victory at the end.

TIERSKY: Spoken like a true optimist and a wonderful, wonderful way for us to close our conversation.

Lieutenant Colonel Diana Morais from Portugal, Colonel Kate Lee from New Zealand, thank you so much for being on Helsinki on the Hill with us, for sharing your experiences with us, for the important work that you’re doing, for being role models and, of course, for your optimism. Thanks again for joining us.

MORAIS: Thank you.

LEE: Thank you, Alex.

TIERSKY: With that, listeners, we’ve come to the end of another episode of Helsinki on the Hill. As you know, we’re always interested in hearing from you. You know how to get in touch. Thanks again for joining us.

Until the next conversation, I’m Alex Tiersky signing off.

(END)