

CLAIMING THE LAST FRONTIER OF EXCLUSION

WOMEN IN AFRICA'S NATIONAL DEFENCE FORCES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The role of women in conflict resolution and peacekeeping in Africa has grown steadily in recent years. This policy brief focuses on the role of women in African militaries, particularly in regard to peacekeeping. It argues that African women in the militaries have moved from invisibility to visibility, signifying in a symbolic way the "return of the amazons." The brief traces the history of women's marginalization in African armed forces and by extension in peacekeeping in the Cold War era. It, however, notes remarkable strides in the inclusion of women in the defence forces in the 1990s, linking this to Africa's "second liberation" which saw the upsurge of democracy, including the pressure for women liberation. Focusing on the case of South Africa the brief observes that "there has been a fundamental change in the gender characteristics of the South Africa National Defence Force (SANDF)." This change has been engendered by the imperatives of the South African democratic constitution which provides guarantees for equal protection of all citizens and gender equality as well as the need to transform South Africa's defence forces in line with its national aspirations for equality and justice. Coupled with this is global and regional regime that has increasingly provided for the rights and freedoms of women, including United Nations Resolution 1325 on gender equality, the AU Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality (2004), the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development (1997.) Despite this, much need to be done to mainstream gender in Africa's defence forces.

Introduction

Contributing during an interactive dialogue between All States and Observers to review progress made towards Women's full participation in conflict prevention, management, resolution and peacebuilding, during the 52nd Session of the Commission on Status of Women, held at the United Nations headquarters in New York (25 February to 7 March 2008), Anne Marie Goetz, Chief Adviser Governance, Peace and Security at UNIFEM noted that Res. 1325, was "along way from being adequately implemented."

Although Resolution 1325 focuses on women participation in the entire cycle on conflict prevention, management, resolution and post conflict reconstruction, it pays close attention to the promotion of the role of women in peace support operations. Yet the 29th February session in New York paid limited attention to the role of women in the security sector. While the session focused on women's participation in four key areas namely peace processes, in their implementation, access to the political arena including electoral process and the overall reconstruction and rehabilitation of their societies, there was glaring absence of substantive discussion on the position of women in security structures in general and the defence sector in particular. This omission occurs in a world where the military is increasingly being called upon to partake in roles and missions that go beyond

their basic military training, and how women fit in this significant tool of transformation, especially for countries in and emerging out of crisis, where integrated operations have become the norm rather than the exception, is crucial.

While the implementation of resolution 1325 is a long way away, it seems like reality on the ground is ahead of policy deliberations and policy-making at the international level. Although no African country has established dedicated mechanisms for the implementation of UN Resolution 1325, the imperatives of transformation has seen some countries undertake radical measures that align to the aspirations and objectives of resolution 1325. Thus, the involvement of women in security forces in Africa is happening faster than in many other parts of the world, including the west. It is therefore critical that efforts towards the implementation of 1325 take cognizance of such realities and reinforce on-going efforts towards gender equality, instead of falling into the old age practice that has characterized relations with Africa, of reinventing the wheel.

From invisibility to visibility

Slowly but steadily women in Africa are claiming their place in the last frontier of their exclusion: the security sector. From being non-existent, women across the African continent are now scaling up the various security sector organisations. However, a closer examination



of the numbers and quality of women participation in these sectors reveals variation across the terrain. On the whole, women are better represented in the public law and order institutions such as the police and gendarmes - where they have risen to occupy positions of decision making in nearly half of the African countries today. This ascendancy in the public law and order sector compares poorly with the intelligence and defence sectors which remain least engendered, and still characterised by environments that are less than enabling for women to realise their full potential. Although the numbers of women in the departments of defence (DOD) are better than in intelligence sectors, they tend to serve in support roles rather than at the sharp-end musterings. In spite of this reality, there is growing realisation that the role of women in the security sector needs to be enhanced, in line with the expanding notion of security, which encompasses not only freedom from fear and want, but also access to opportunities that enable all people to realise their optimal potential in the service of their societies, across all sectors including security. The push for women engagement is also hinged on gains of the more than three decades-long campaign spearheaded by the women's and human rights movements - which have advocated for gender equality as a matter of right rather than privilege.

Over time, attempts at accelerating the involvement of women in the defence sector

are paralleled institutional as well as societal resistance to their joining the armed forces. Those women that join the forces find themselves in environments that are less than enabling, making it difficult for them to perform optimally. The increase in the numbers of women serving in the defence forces will require measures that improve the security environment by specifically stripping of its machismo status and characteristics. At the same time societal opinion, largely defined by gender roles and socialisation still perceive security as a male preserve and therefore not a place for women. This reality dissuades women from volunteering to join the armed forces, making it difficult to increase the pool of the women available to serve within the forces.

While women across the world still await full integrated in the military, experiences in countries where this has happened generate critical lessons that demonstrate the value accruing from gender mainstreaming. Illustration from South Africa demonstrates how the definition of security, character of war, and skills and techniques required for peacebuilding make gender mainstreaming an integral part of security sector transformation. It also provides proof that gender mainstreaming improves the quality and effectiveness of the military. Furthermore, the growing experience of South Africa since its democratisation in 1994 has led to positive spin-offs at the regional level, contributing towards a better regional security regime, and



continentally improving the quality and impact of its forces in peacekeeping operations.

A history of marginalisation

The campaign for the involvement of women in the defence sector has been slow, incremental and replete with obstacles. For a number of reasons, including the manner in which security was conventionally defined and organized, women were excluded from discussing or providing security. Defined in terms of state, and often, regime survival, defence and security were matters of high politics, pursued primarily by state actors, usually through diplomatic channels, variously referred to as Track I diplomacy. Because women have historically been largely absent from high political arenas, they have remained absent from the formal arena that sought peace and security. Secondly, security was organised as a male preserve, militaries operated in the battlefield and war was prosecuted by men, in the name of governments. Within this machismo logic, women were constructed as part of the recipients of security. So, even women activities relating to peace and security were relegated to the local community level and have been variously defined as community based initiatives. Even when such initiatives are proven key to sustaining societal coexistence particularly in Africa, they have hardly fully informed formal peace processes, and neither have they been later drawn on them in any substantive ways. Throughout the 1990s when

Africa was experiencing a wave of brokering peace, there was a laudable absence of women's or their groups on the peace table even as they campaigned to be allowed to participate.

More fundamentally, and for a long time, debate on the role of women in society focused away from security. Women were spoken of in terms of development and for most of Africa their role was limited to rural small-scale agriculture. When the women movement coalesced in the 1970s and 1980s, lobbying led to initiatives that promoted the participation and mainstreaming of women in development. Following the 1975 Mexico UN Women Conference, the world witnessed the establishment of Women Bureaus and Desks in most governments across the world. While this was a major step forward, most of these institutions remained marginalized from mainstream government activities and without any level of authority to effect meaningful change to the lives of women. More importantly, much of this debate occurred outside the security sector which was a no-go area for women, at least in all of Africa.

The 1990s saw a shift in the campaign for the involvement of women in the broad area of conflict resolution and peace processes. Within the African continent, which was ravaged by war and conflict then, debates focused at two levels. The first was a push to involve women in decision-making levels where issues of war and



peace were dealt with. Nonetheless, women remained invisible at the highest decision-making levels dealing with conflicts throughout the 1990s. A UN appraisal on this matter recommended that "...the United Nations and the international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) [should] continue to monitor and support women's increased involvement in peace processes..."(1992). Echoing this position the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women recommended that "...governments should be encouraged to increase participation of women in the peace process at the decision-making level, including them as part of delegations to negotiate international agreements relating to peace and disarmament, and establishing a target number of women participating in such delegations."(1992). While several international initiatives such as the UNSECO Culture of Peace Programme and UNIFEM's Africa Women in Crisis Programme (AFWIC) emerged during this period and improved the status of women participation in peace process, their activities remained at the fringes of hard security and focused on the "softer" side of security, code-named "peacebuilding."

Similarly, the acclaimed Beijing Conference of 1995 did not address the question of women participation in defence in a comprehensive manner. While it contributed to the recognition of the role of women in conflict resolution and generated a momentum for their participation

in peacemaking, it was not until the adoption of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), that attention was focused squarely on the role of women in the entire cycle of conflict prevention, management, resolution and post-conflict reconstruction. Although it arguable that resolution 1325 is enforceable – in line with Art. 41 of the United Nations Charter – its language is weak and non-compelling. Furthermore, it does not have an implementation or monitoring mechanism.

Women and the defence sector in Africa

In Africa, the opportunity for women to enter the defence sector coincides with the decade of the 1990s, dubbed the decade of the "Second liberation", when many countries embarked on political transformation processes. As democratisation expands the security sector has been a key target of the transformation. Security sector reform or transformation is driven by the imperative to align security forces to the needs of the population, revert the ownership of the security sector to the society, and make this sector representative of the demographic characteristics of the societies for which it provided security. While this process was initially driven from outside of the continent, over time, countries have increasingly come to identify with the need to have security forces that are responsive to the needs of their society.



The imperative and opportunity for security sector transformation is stronger in countries that have gone through war – where there is an absolute necessity to reconfigure security and reorganise its provision. Yet, there is still marked resistance and uneven reactions to women serving in a sector that is associated with masculinity, even in post war countries. Although in many instances women fought side by side with their male colleagues for liberation and democratisation across the continent as evidenced in Kenya, Eritrea, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Mozambique, etc, the tendency has leaned towards demobilising and encouraging them to take on more “feminine” roles after democratisation. Among the few exceptions to this rule is South Africa which sought to build on the experience of its liberation. Having remained central to the negotiations that led to the transformation, the South African society has ingrained gender equality with this normative framework in particular its constitution but has gone further to brace its realisation. The experience of the last decade and half are demonstrative of value of a clear vision, political commitment and resolve to pursue gender equality in improving the operational relevance of a defence force.

South Africa and gender in the Department of Defence

Since 1994, there has been a fundamental change in the gender characteristics of the

South Africa National Defence Force (SANDF). The former defence force was a key sector identified for transformation because of its previous role largely because they had been used and an instrument to secure regime survival, and therefore had operated without public accountability. In the post-1994 South Africa, the forces were conceived as a tool to secure society, to be owned by and accountable to society (through their representatives), and hence to be reflective of democratic ethos. According to the White Paper on Defence (1996) the re-orientation of the DOD to a people centred approach was aimed at securing the legitimacy of the armed forces and to overcome the legacy of racial and gender discrimination. Up until the commencement of this transformation process, the composition of the South African Defence Forces (SADF) was artificially manipulated, in line with the apartheid regime and ideology, and comprised largely of male white conscripts. While (white) women were allowed to serve in the defence forces from 1970, they were not eligible to serve in all sectors.

The imperative for gender equality in the SANDF is underpinned by three imperatives: The first is a constitutional imperative, elaborated in Section 9(2) of the Constitution of South Africa, which guarantees equal protection of every citizen, equal enjoyment of all rights and freedoms by all women and men from diverse cultural, economic and other backgrounds, and that prohibits discrimination



on the grounds of gender, sex, pregnancy and marital status. Among the guaranteed rights is that of every person to choose to serve the society at all levels and in all capacities, including the provision of security within the defence forces. As part of equality measures, this clause provides for positive measures to assist those sections of society that have been previously “unfairly” disadvantaged, or that have suffered systemic inherited inequalities. Thus, equality embraces the “promotion” of achievement of equality. Owing to the historical marginalisation of women, affirmative action or women empowerment becomes an essential element for the achievement of equality across all sectors, including defence.

The second imperative for gender equality stems from the requirement for South Africa to align itself and comply with developments and instruments to which it is a signatory at the international, continental and regional levels. Some of the significant instruments in this regard are UN Res. 1325, the AU Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality (2004), the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development (1997) and the addendum on the Prevention and Eradication of Violence against Women and Children, which specifically stipulates a 30% target for women's involvement at all levels of decision making, including representation in armed forces and peacekeeping operations. In March 2007, SADC revised this proportion upwards to 50:50, in line with the continental commitment

declared following the adoption of the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality (2003) and the implementation of the parity principle within all AU structures.

The third imperative that grounds gender equality in South Africa derives its efforts to transform its defence forces in line with its national aspirations for equality and justice, the desire to transfer ownership of the SANDF to the people and ensure the republican character of the defence forces. From a defence perspective, the principle of inclusion enables the forces to tap on the full potential of the society, which in turn optimises its operational readiness. The push for gender equality is further reinforced in chapter six of the South Africa Defence White Paper (1996), which underscores the principle of equality in the SANDF and states the requirement for representativeness, in terms of “racial and gender composition of the SANDF” as fundamental to the legitimacy of this national institution. Further, aspiration for gender equality is also found in the defence review which specifically refers to the need to eliminate any obstacles against training women for command positions in combat related specializations.

Reflecting this position, the Ministry of Defence has repeatedly reiterated its commitment to align itself to the South African Constitution and the spirit and letter of the international prescripts on gender equality and human



rights. Specifically, there has been commitment to a) increase the representation of women at all ranks in the SANDF and in the Defence Secretariat; b) accept women in combat role; and c) provide sensitivity education and training for all defence personnel without exception. As observed by the Deputy Minister during the budget Vote address in 2006, the "transformation agenda of the Department of Defence, as it relates to inclusion, gender equity, and improved management remains central to the achievement of any of the Department's long-term objectives for sustained military preparedness."

Achievements

A number of milestones have been achieved since the integration and formation of the post-1994 SANDF. At a strategic level, the DOD has developed comprehensive plans and strategies to ensure equal opportunities for all women in the organisation. Following the first national conference on women in defence in 1997, the SANDF established a directorate to address equity issues. The second national conference, held in 2006, recommended a number of measures to accelerate gender mainstreaming, including a Gender Mainstreaming Council (GMC) to oversee the implementation of gender equality and gender focal points in all services and divisions. It also sought budgets for gender programmes and developed clear prescripts for 50/50 representation of women at all decision

making levels. The third national conference on women in defence, held in August 2007, reviewed progress and made recommendations towards increasing the numbers as well as improving the quality of women engagement in the SANDF.

In terms of proportions women comprise 22% of the overall the SANDF population across all its ranks, which is comparable to long standing armed forces globally. Further, the SANDF has attained a 30% women recruitment level and targets to increase this to 40% during its 2008/2009 intake. In terms of general staff officers, there is a steady positive trend in promoting women to decision making levels. In 2006 of 10 Brigadier Generals appointed, four were women, and of 55 colonels promoted, 17 were women. The number increased to 8 out of 11 Brigadier Generals promoted in 2007. Such achievements are guided by policies, including a ministerial directive to review the status of women in decision making levels, on an annual basis.

A growing number of women is also getting into the various sectors and specialised skills levels, including as divers, pilots, engineers, parachutists and a wide array of military combat roles. There are also concerted efforts to increase the number of women available for deployment as South African, SADC, African Union commanders, as well as UN PSO unit commanders. To improve the pool of women in combat, the SANDF has embarked on reviewing policies and procedures for



selecting, training and career management for women. It has also launched a number of studies to inform its programmes, and improve its pre-deployment, deployment and post-deployment environments.

Aware that change in attitude is crucial to creating conducive environment for women to join the forces and to realise their full potential, the SANDF has embarked on gender sensitivity education and training at all levels. The first such training, targeting the top level management, took place in May 2007. The Chief Directorate of Transformation is intent of making this a repeated activity in order to assess progress and find strategies for dealing with arising challenges. In an effort to enhance efforts are creating a conducive environment through increasing the numbers of women at all levels as well as promoting their vertical ascendancy, the promotion of gender equity is one of the management performance indicator for senior managers across the force.

The SANDF is also committed to improving the empowerment of women in order to enable them to drive the equality agenda. The 2007 national conference also engaged in a process of crafting strategies for empowering women in the defence forces so that they can contribute to the operational effectiveness of the SANDF, and champion gender equality without compromising the mission and role of the SANDF.

To guarantee civilian oversight and control, the SANDF Chief Directorate of Transformation is working closely with non-defence structures engaged in promoting the role of women in the search for peace, such as South Africa Women in Dialogue Organisation, the Africa Policy Institute, and *Femmes Africaine Solidarite*. It is also interacts closely with parliamentary structures particularly the Joint Standing Committee on Defence and the Portfolio Committee on Defence.

The performance of SA troops in peace support operations, together with the increasing demand for their deployment is a major proof of the confidence that this force enjoys internationally. Today, South Africa is under pressure from countries in crisis to help resolve them either diplomatically or through PSO support. SA troops, particularly women, have also been associated with boosting hope and morale amongst societies where the SANDF has been deployed. This development has also been seen in Liberia where the deployment of an all-women police contingent became a model that contributed to substantial enrolment of women into the police force. One other most exciting spin-off of positive national activities has been the strengthening of the regional SADC Women in Defence Peace Table. This annual forum brings together women serving in decision-making positions of SADC countries defence forces to share experiences on the status of gender equality in their armed forces, reflect on



challenges confronting them, and map out a 12-months plan of action that seeks to promote the increase in numbers and improve the quality of women participation in defence forces. The ultimate objective of this forum is to harmonise activities relating to women in the defence forces and contribute towards sustainable human security in the SADC region.

Challenges

While there are commendable achievements towards gender equality in the South Africa and the SADC region, compared to the rest of the continent, the greatest challenge confronting this agenda is the lack of comprehensive compliance as far as the precept of gender mainstreaming is concerned. Nonetheless, the case of South Africa demonstrates that political will, clear policies and institutional framework can go along way in facilitating the right environment for gender mainstreaming in the defence forces. These lessons are valuable for other defence forces in the region, on the African continent and beyond. Given the centrality of security as a prerequisite for the attainment of sustainable development in Africa, the continent is compelled to ensure that more than half its population, the women, participate effectively in the determination of the desired security and in contributing to its achievement.

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