

East Africa Report

Women in the military in Africa

Kenya case study

Yolande Bouka and Romi Sigsworth

Summary

Kenya is a key actor in East African security, playing a major role in multinational peacekeeping forces. The Kenya Defence Forces are active in regions where gender-based violence is pervasive, both during and after conflict, yet the access of women in the Kenyan military to meaningful assignments is influenced by traditional attitudes regarding women's work, and the deployment of women to conflict situations is rare. Research on policy frameworks guiding gender mainstreaming in the Kenyan security sector – and the extent to which policy is carried out – has identified the space women occupy in the KDF and the challenges they face when opting for a career in the military.

KENYA IS CONSIDERED a stable democracy relative to its volatile East African neighbours. Despite this reputation, the political violence that gripped the country after the 2007 elections – regarded as a political, economic and humanitarian disaster – left over 1 000 people dead, several thousand subjected to sexual violence and hundreds of thousands displaced, and gave rise to the Kenyan Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission in 2008.

The country does, however, play a significant role in the promotion and maintenance of peace and security in Africa. It has been a key actor in regional security, notably through its deployment of troops with the Africa Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), a multi-dimensional peace-support operation, and in numerous other United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions on the continent. Domestically, the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) protect the country against threats from al-Shabaab, the Mombasa Revolutionary Council (MRC) and complex pastoralist conflicts in the northern parts of the country.

As a result of these internal and external security dynamics, and as an integral part of the African Union Peace and Security Architecture, the KDF play a high-profile and tangible role in the lives of Somali and Kenyan civilians in general, and women in particular. More specifically, the KDF are engaged in operations within regions where sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) during and after conflict is pervasive.

Female security and peacekeeping personnel deployed in conflict settings can play a positive role in engaging with communities as a whole, and with women in particular

It is therefore important to explore whether and how gender is mainstreamed in the Kenyan military to further our knowledge and understanding of the status and dynamics surrounding women in the country's defence force. While the literature suggests that their experience in security sector institutions and during combat differs from that of their male counterparts, the integration of women in defence forces remains understudied. The ISS conducted research in 2015 aimed at reviewing policy frameworks guiding gender mainstreaming in the Kenyan security sector, identifying the space women occupy and the roles that women play in the KDF, and determining some of the challenges of implementing gender mainstreaming in the force.

Policy framework for gender equality

In the past two decades, there has been a concerted global effort to identify and address the differential effects of conflict and violence on men, women, boys and girls and the concerns of women in conflict to highlight the importance of women's participation in maintaining and promoting peace and security. These efforts gave rise to the adoption of the landmark United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1325, adopted on 31 October 2000.

Resolution 1325, which is considered the blueprint for gender, peace and security, and is based on promoting the rights of women to participate in peace and security institutions, processes and decision-making structures, as well as preventing violence against women and ensuring their protection. The resolution calls for: the increased representation of women in all peace and disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration processes; a gendered perspective to be adopted in the negotiation and implementation of peace agreements; the protection of women and girls from SGBV and an end to impunity for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Resolution 1325 was followed in 2009 by UNSC Resolution 1888, which mandates that peacekeeping missions protect women and children from sexual violence during armed conflict, and UNSC Resolution 1889, which urges member states, UN bodies, donors and civil society to ensure that the protection and empowerment of women are taken into account during post-conflict needs assessment and planning. Resolution 2122, adopted in

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AND SECURITY

2013, puts stronger measures in place to allow women to participate in all phases of conflict prevention, resolution and recovery and locates the responsibility for providing them with seats at the peace table on member states, regional organisations and the UN.

Since Resolution 1325 was ratified, many countries – including African states – have experienced varying degrees of success in advocating the inclusion of women in peace and security frameworks and for gender mainstreaming in the security sector. Against a backdrop of increasing reports of incidents of sexual exploitation and abuse by troops involved in peacekeeping missions across Africa,¹ research has indicated that female security and peacekeeping personnel deployed in conflict settings can play a positive role in engaging with communities as a whole, and with women in particular, as well as enhancing civilian protection measures.²

African women have a history of contributing to security institutions that seems to elude contemporary analysis

In Africa, the principles of Resolution 1325 have been embedded in various continental and regional instruments. The African Union's (AU) *Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and Rights of Women in Africa* (2003) requires member states to combat all forms of discrimination against women through appropriate legislative, institutional and other measures. The AU's *Framework on Security Sector Reform* notes that 'security sector reform will adhere to the principles of gender equality and women's empowerment ... and will therefore include women-specific activities, gender awareness and responsive programming, and aim to bring about transformative possibilities for gender equity within the security sector'.³

Most recently, the AU's *Gender, Peace and Security Programme (2015–2020)* was launched in 2014 'to serve as a framework for the development of effective strategies and mechanisms for women's increased participation in the promotion of peace and security. It is also designed to enhance the protection of women in conflict and post-conflict situations in Africa'.⁴

In East Africa the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region's *Pact on Security, Stability and*

Development in the Great Lakes Region (2006) commits member states to 'equality between men and women, including the use of positive discrimination policies'.⁵ Furthermore, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (comprised of Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya and Uganda) has adopted a Regional Action Plan (RAP) for Resolution 1325. This RAP addresses the under-representation of women at the negotiating tables for conflict prevention, management and resolution, the lack of understanding of gender needs in peacekeeping missions and the absence of women from the various levels of security forces.⁶

Despite a sound policy framework the implementation of these resolutions, pacts and protocols has been slow and patchy. A UN-commissioned global study reviewing the progress towards and challenges to the implementation of Resolution 1325 was published in October 2015. The key findings of the study included the assessment that much of the progress towards the implementation of Resolution 1325 continues to be measured in 'firsts' rather than carried out as standard practice, and that women acting as negotiators and women in the military in UN missions are two of the most persistently challenging areas for ensuring women's equal and meaningful participation.⁷ Regional and national action plans on Resolution 1325 are the primary tools for its implementation, as well as the primary source of evidence for measuring progress against commitments to the resolution. It is significant that only 60 countries globally – 18 in Africa – have formulated national action plans on women, peace and security.⁸

Women in the security sector in Africa

Like many women around the world African women have a long history of contributing to security institutions that often seems to elude contemporary analysis of gender and security. Much of the interpretation and analysis of security concerns on the continent is based on masculine interpretations and experience; any gendered analysis tends to focus on the victimhood of women in conflict.

In the pre-colonial era there were notable examples of women as agents and actors in the security sector. Queen Ahhotep I of Egypt played an important role in her country's liberation struggle. The Dahomey Amazons (from modern-day Benin) formed a key group of female

warriors in the national army, and their equivalents in Monomotapa (modern-day Zimbabwe) were renowned for their courage and efficiency.⁹

Colonial political economy drastically altered gender relations and the role of women in the provision of security, relegating them mostly to the domestic sphere.¹⁰ This does not mean that women in pre-colonial Africa enjoyed the same rights as men; however, the scholarly consensus suggests that European gender roles imposed on African women relegated women to the private sphere and eroded some of their rights.

During the colonial era, African women found themselves under the structural constraints of both gender and racial discrimination. For that reason many women joined armed struggles fighting for independence in the belief that victory would not only liberate their nation but would also provide women with more freedom and opportunities. However, in many cases, post-independence African states urged women to return to the domestic sphere. While women were allowed to retain some of the dividends of their contribution to liberation, they failed to achieve the equality they had been promised.

In Kenya, this situation is exemplified by the case of women who fought in the Mau Mau Revolution. While some joined the movement as support staff or in gathering intelligence, others operated as combatants.¹¹ Kenyan women were considered successful warriors in this struggle, as indicated by a Kenyan who explained that his 'grandmother told me that she was a Mau Mau freedom fighter. She even showed me gunshot scars sustained because of her involvement.'¹² Yet following independence Kikuyu women who had fought alongside men were erased from the public narrative.¹³

Many women joined armed struggles fighting for independence believing victory would not only liberate their nation but would also provide women with more opportunities

More recently, African women have regained their place in their countries' armed forces, sometimes after decades of exclusion. The introduction of new constitutions in Africa – which include specific language about equality and non-discrimination – has anchored many of the efforts to include women in defence forces. The global gender, peace and security agenda – formalised through UN resolutions – has also galvanised states into setting quotas for the inclusion of women in their security sectors.

Some African states, which have constitutionally enshrined quota systems in all branches of government, require that a certain percentage of the workforce be composed of women. In Kenya, the Constitution mandates that at least 30% of the government-employed workforce, including the armed forces, should be women. Similarly, provisions have been included to mandate equal employment opportunities for both men and women in Malawi, which applies to recruitment in the defence force.

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The reality is, however, that the level of participation of women in the armed forces in Africa remains low. In southern Africa, South Africa leads with 30% female representation in the South African National Defence Force, followed by 23% in Namibia and 20% in Zimbabwe.¹⁴

In East Africa, it is more difficult to assess the figure: across the board, national defence forces are reluctant to provide data about the numbers or percentages of women within the rank-and-file and in decision-making positions. The Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) have a total of 1 566 female soldiers,¹⁵ but as data revealing the total number of soldiers in the military are not publicised for reasons of national security, it is impossible to know what percentage of the UPDF is constituted by females.

The low level of women's participation in domestic security institutions is reflected at the regional level, where the presence of women in peacekeeping missions is also not prioritised

However, very few women are promoted to top-ranking positions: less than 2% of colonels and lieutenant colonels are female; 3% of majors and 8.5% of captains are women.¹⁶ In Rwanda, an estimated 0.8% of the defence force is female.¹⁷ A mere 0.46% of the National Defence Force in Burundi is female, with no women represented in decision-making positions.¹⁸ There is currently no publicly available data for the number of women in the Tanzania People's Defence Forces.

The low level of women's participation in domestic security institutions is reflected at the regional level where the presence of women in peacekeeping missions is also not prioritised. While African states have taken the lead in contributing troops to UN and AU peacekeeping missions, the total number of female personnel in the UN Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), for example, stands at only 2%.

Societal barriers to gender equality

Despite the policies and the commitment of African states to develop gender inclusive frameworks, therefore, space for women in the defence forces often remains limited. Gendered stereotypes continue to feed into a resistance against women's full and active integration and participation in the military, especially in decision-making positions.¹⁹

There are two underlying barriers to women's inclusion in the security sector and the establishment of substantive gender equality within these institutions.

As in many places around the world, military values, ideologies and patterns of behaviour in Africa continue to reflect and symbolise masculinity and patriarchy.²⁰ The objectives of any military are to attack and to defend from attack, both of which necessitate the legitimised use of violence, which is seen as the preserve of men. Soldiers are meant to be characterised by 'raw power, strength, lethal force, aggression, competitiveness,

0.46%

THE PERCENTAGE OF
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censure of emotional expression and the creation and dehumanisation of the “enemy”,²¹ all traditionally masculine qualities. Physical strength has for a long time been the prime determinant of military prowess, and although the development of long-range and high-tech weapons means this characteristic has lost some relevance in a practical sense, it still remains important in the patriarchal distribution of power.²²

The notions of peaceful and generative femininity limit the space women can occupy within traditional security sector institutions

Women, on the other hand, are associated with peace and are often essentialised with reference to their roles as mothers, sisters, wives and daughters – roles that require them to be nurturers and life-givers, preferably in the domestic context. These notions of peaceful and generative femininity limit the space women can occupy within traditional security sector institutions and deny women agency within the military through the expectation that they will fulfil roles that support but are not actively involved in warfare.²³ Placing women in combat roles therefore creates tension between the liberal principle of equality and the culturally embedded view of what it means to be a warrior, the personification of violent masculinity.²⁴ It also fundamentally disrupts a combat taboo, that those who give life should not take life.²⁵

The reality is, however, that the theory of women’s propensity for peace ignores their historical involvement in warfare, the examples of which have been outlined above.²⁶ Indeed, a focus on women’s ‘natural’ capacities silences the diversity of female characteristics and negates the experiences of women who have played important and active roles in warfare.²⁷

The growing recognition in the past half-century of the importance of gender equality to prosperous and peaceful societies began to find traction in the peace and security sector towards the end of the 20th century. The inclusion of women in the security sector and an expansion of their roles were crucial first steps, and the focus of many of the UN Security Council resolutions on the issue.²⁸

However, the lesson of the past 15 years has been that increasing the representation of women as a result of quotas does not necessarily translate into the substantive

and equal participation of women, that is, shifting the norms that perpetuate gender inequality – in the security sector.²⁹ Indeed, this approach tends to confuse formal equality, which focuses on legal frameworks, and substantive equality, which aims not only to change the laws but also to remedy discriminatory practices.³⁰ By simply appending gender language and de jure inclusive rules, without deliberate efforts to address the informal norms that perpetuate disparities between men and women in their ability to thrive in military institutions, inequalities will remain.³¹

It must be added that many governments in Africa have lacked the political will, resources and accountability structures even to implement their own legislated quotas and do not make active efforts to recruit women into the military.

The focus on the number of women in military institutions (as opposed to transforming power relations), as well as the socio-cultural essentialisation of women, can be detrimental to gender mainstreaming in two important ways.³²

Firstly, it facilitates the continued channelling of women in the military into more traditional supportive roles. Female personnel are often deployed where it is perceived to be less dangerous, which is not necessarily where they are most needed.³³ This relegation to administrative or support roles often impedes women’s prospects of promotion, which is based on field or combat experience.³⁴ And secondly, this ‘add-on’ approach does not precipitate any real change within military institutions, meaning that they remain sexist and often sexually violent spaces for women. Militaries cannot or do not always offer a working environment that is conducive to women – such as providing separate and secure accommodation and ablution facilities, having childcare options for working mothers or single mothers, and designing equipment and uniforms that fit women. As a result of these factors, women within militaries often survive either by assimilating a pseudo-masculinity to fit in,³⁵ or by conforming to traditional gender roles by accepting auxiliary roles within the institution.³⁶

Indeed one of the arguments advanced along with the convention of women’s natural attributes is that a gendered perspective improves operational effectiveness and that women can provide new insights into different situational awareness, thereby reducing uncertainty in

the field.³⁷ However, this instrumentalist approach to inclusion/mainstreaming often reinforces stereotypes.³⁸

Improving the status of women in Kenya

There is an important link between gender (in)equality in society as a whole and gender (in)equality in the security sector: in fact, as a fundamentally inequitable institution, the defence force often amplifies the inequalities present in broader society. Kenya represents an interesting case study in this regard.

The promulgation of the 2010 Constitution marked a significant turning point for consolidating women's rights in Kenya, as it entrenched affirmative action and conferred many gains on women. Article 27 of the Constitution guarantees equality and freedom from discrimination, and stipulates that 'women and men have the right to equal treatment, including the right to equal opportunities in political, economic, cultural and social spheres'.³⁹ Legislation on sexual offences, domestic violence and child marriage and the National Gender and Development Policy (currently under review) form part of the government's response to addressing gender inequality and ensuring women's empowerment.

The promulgation of the 2010 Constitution marked a significant turning point for consolidating women's rights, as it entrenched affirmative action

In March 2016, Kenya launched its Resolution 1325 National Action Plan (NAP). The plan was developed through a participatory and consultative process, including civil society and women's organisations.⁴⁰ Its authors claim it is 'premised on a human security framework, under the theme "*Kuhusisha Wanawake ni Kudumisha Amani*" – to involve women is to sustain peace'.⁴¹ The objectives of the NAP include:

- Developing the capacity of women to engage in decision-making roles in early warning and prevention mechanisms and processes.
- Increasing the capacities of security sector institutions to respond to threats of violence against women and girls and other vulnerable groups by, among other things, providing specialised gender training for all Kenya Defence Forces and civilian personnel deployed in conflict prevention and peacekeeping missions.
- Advocating for the appointment of women in leadership positions in institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict during all phases and at all levels of decision making.
- Increasing the awareness of sexual and gender-based offences and prevention of all forms of violence against women by, among other things, the employment of gender experts and deployment of relevant technical expertise in the Kenya Defence Forces and other institutions involved in conflict prevention and peacekeeping operations.⁴²



Article 27
OF KENYA'S CONSTITUTION
GUARANTEES EQUALITY
AND FREEDOM FROM
DISCRIMINATION

However, Kenya's development continues to be undermined by poverty, inequality and governance challenges. Levels of SGBV are high: 37% of women in Kenya have reported experiencing physical violence and 17% have reported suffering sexual violence in their lifetime.⁴³ Patriarchy and negative cultural practices such as wife inheritance are some of the dominant social factors contributing to SGBV in Kenya. Some critics have argued that since SGBV is premised on power imbalances, which are supported and sanctioned by culture, the current Constitution has not provided mechanisms for educating people to shun cultural practices that perpetuate violence or on how certain cultural norms can be dealt with in order to free women from violence.⁴⁴

Added to this are the increased security threats of radicalisation and violent extremism, often manifested in terrorist acts across the country.⁴⁵ Women are both victims of and active participants in this violence: cases of females suspected of being recruiters and potential terrorists, suicide bombers and jihadi brides are increasingly reported in the media. Responses to terrorism have also tended to be reactive, with policy approaches seemingly not gendered, despite the role of women as mobilisers, sympathisers, preventers and peace-builders being crucial in any form of response. The combination of these factors means that the security of women in Kenya continues to be jeopardised.

This low political participation of women, especially in the electoral process, has been attributed to the country's patriarchal culture and electoral system

Kenya has made some strides towards including women in politics. Women occupy approximately 31% of the seats in the Kenyan cabinet, with women in key positions such as minister of defence, principal secretary in the ministry of interior and coordination of government, minister for foreign affairs and minister of devolution and planning. However, the state faces challenges in fulfilling its 30% gender quotas in other parts of government and women are not well represented in elective positions. This low political participation of women, especially in the electoral process, has been attributed to the country's patriarchal culture and electoral system.⁴⁶

Public and government attitudes to women in leadership are characterised by unusual, aggressive, and unceremonious humiliation of women in office, exemplified by the parliamentary rejection of Monica Juma from the position of secretary to the cabinet despite the fact that she was nominated by the president.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, as with the representation of women in the security sector, the assumption that the mere presence of women in politics will lead to more equality for women is false and does not necessarily translate into true challenges to patriarchal power structures or to positive policy outcomes for women, especially in societies that are still predominantly patriarchal in nature.⁴⁸



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Women in the Kenya Defence Forces

As a government institution, the KDF is one of the many branches of the Kenyan government that has been pushed to improve its governance, in part through the advancement of gender equality. In 2012, the new Defence Forces Act dismantled many legal and institutional barriers to full equality for women in the KDF. In 2013, ambassador Raychelle Omamo was appointed cabinet secretary of defence; she also chairs the Defence Council, which is responsible for the overall policy, control, and supervision of the KDF. In addition, a new position of chief gender officer has been created in the KDF.

In August 2015, Fatumah Ahmed became the first woman brigadier in the history of the KDF. The recently published Kenyan National Action Plan states that 'our security sector is taking measures to improve the quality of women's participation in and contribution to security in the country, and increase their numbers. There is targeted recruitment, and Kenya has developed programmes that integrate gender training for troops prior to deployment in peacekeeping operations, undertaken in line with United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1325, 1820, 1888, 1889, 1960, 2106, 2122, and 2242 by the National Defence College.'⁴⁹

Women's participation in the Kenyan armed forces can be traced back to 1971 with the establishment of the Women Service Corps (WSC). The WSC was formed to 'support fighting units during wartime by providing personnel for military installations where women were assigned roles such as secretarial, clerical, logistics, medical and communication; perform administrative roles during peace time; and provide employment opportunities to women in a male dominated field'.⁵⁰ As part of the WSC, women trained and operated within the army only, separately from the men, and were engaged in mostly traditional female roles as support staff away from combatant operations. Even in these very limited roles, informal norms imposed additional restrictions on women based on 'special terms and conditions' to take into account their 'special needs', thus limiting women's ability to thrive in the army.⁵¹ Women who chose to marry or have children, or who had romantic relationships with their male colleagues, were discharged from the force.⁵²

In 1999, the WSC was disbanded to allow women to be integrated into all three branches of the military – army,

navy and air force – where they are legally eligible for any post and rank. While the disbanding of the WSC offered more freedom and equality to women, it was only with the adoption of the 2010 Constitution and the new Kenya Defence Forces Act that specific language about equal rights and equal opportunities for women was codified. The constitutionally-enshrined quota system for all branches of government requires that at least 30% of KDF personnel are women.

Publicly available statistics on the number of women currently serving in the KDF are scarce. Nevertheless, the limited evidence suggests that women have made important strides since 2000. For example, in 2001 there were no women officers in the navy. Ten years later, there were reportedly 11 female officers and 115 service women in the force.⁵³ The army has also seen a steady increase in women's recruitment.⁵⁴ Women are now visible in combat zones and in peacekeeping operations in Africa.⁵⁵ In 2014, the Chief of Defence of the KDF (then vice chief), Lt Gen Samsom Mwathethe, reiterated the KDF recruitment commitment to meet the 30% female quota. He also stressed that the KDF is an equal opportunity employer and that all personnel, including women, are given equal opportunities to excel in their careers.⁵⁶

The assumption that the mere presence of women in politics will lead to more equality for women is false

There has also been some progress that goes beyond the numbers. Since 2000, women have been included on joint training exercises with their male counterparts. Moreover, military infrastructure has been developed so that housing is more family friendly than it used to be, and women are no longer discharged from the armed forces for having children or choosing to marry. The combination of these factors has improved the retention of female recruits in the armed forces.⁵⁷

Kenya currently deploys 233 women to peacekeeping missions, which comprises 19% of their overall contribution.

Kenya also deploys troops to AMISOM, where its forces are responsible for securing Sector 2, comprising Lower

Table 1: Kenyan contributions to UN peacekeeping missions

Mission	Description	Male	Female	Total
MINUSCA	Experts on mission	6	0	6
	Contingent troops	6	2	8
MINUSMA	Experts on mission	1	2	3
	Contingent troops	2	2	4
MONUSCO	Experts on mission	9	4	13
	Contingent troops	12	1	13
UNAMID	Experts on mission	4	0	4
	Contingent troops	104	10	114
UNIFIL	Contingent troops	1	0	1
UNMIL	Individual police	7	3	10
UNMISS	Individual police	14	5	19
	Experts on mission	14	0	14
	Contingent troops	819	204	1 023
Totals		999	233	1 232

Source: www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/contributors/2016/apr16_3.pdf

and Middle Juba in Somalia. Chief Inspector Purity Muthoni from Kenya said female peacekeepers deployed to AMISOM are 'committed and hardworking individuals who understand the nature of the mission'.⁵⁸

The International Peace Support Training Centre (IPSTC) in Nairobi is a regional institution that conducts capacity building in international peace support operations for military, police and civilian personnel from the member states of the Eastern Africa Standby Force, including the KDF. In November 2015, the IPSTC launched its gender policy with the aim of institutionalising gender equality at the training centre and advancing the women, peace and security agenda in peace support operations.⁵⁹

An important goal of the IPSTC's gender policy is to promote the application of the United Nations Security Council resolutions on women, peace and security.

Specific commitments within its gender policy speak to:

- Integrating gender into the system approach to training.
- Putting in place mechanisms for monitoring the ratio of male to female trainees and taking remedial measures to achieve an appropriate gender balance through advocacy with member states to nominate female participants for courses.

- Mobilising and allocating adequate financial and human resources to support gender mainstreaming activities, including implementation of the Gender Policy.
- Persuading Kenya's Ministry of Defence and all partners who second uniformed officers to deploy both males and females.⁶⁰

The IPSTC includes a gender component in most of its training courses, and also offers a pre-deployment course for peacekeepers on conflict-related SGBV.⁶¹ The aim of the course is 'to enhance participants' understanding of the international legal standards and mechanisms for the prevention and response of SGBV and to ensure its centrality in planning, implementation and conduct in peace support operations (PSO) with a view to significantly reducing its prevalence'.⁶²

Challenges women face in the KDF

Despite the efforts outlined above, more work is required to improve the quantity and quality of women's participation in the KDF. Preliminary research suggests a number of choke points to gender mainstreaming.

Women remain poorly represented in the military and the security sector as a whole. Female officers still constitute

only 8% of the defence forces, clearly below the constitutionally mandated threshold.⁶³ However, a focus on the numbers as the only measure of the inclusion of women also impedes Kenya's attempts at gender mainstreaming in the military.⁶⁴ Substantive equality needs to be addressed at a more fundamental level.

There are two broad underlying reasons for the slow progress towards gender equality in the Kenyan defence forces.

Firstly, some of the challenges to gender mainstreaming in the security sector and other areas of government leadership are associated with a socio-cultural resistance to women participating in sectors traditionally occupied by men. Kenyan society is highly patriarchal; socialisation and expectations about traditional gender roles remain strong. Nowhere is this more the case than with regard to women's roles and capabilities in the security sector. For this reason the military is not generally accepted as a legitimate and promising career choice for women.⁶⁵

Linked to this are the cultural and spiritual beliefs of some ethnic or religious groups in Kenya, which prevent some women from contemplating the military as a viable career. For example, some recruitment efforts that have proved to be successful in some parts of the country have failed in others because of a lack of understanding or acknowledgement of local perceptions about womanhood and women's participation in the security sector. In 2014, a recruitment exercise conducted in Mandera East – an area inhabited predominantly by ethnic Somalis – failed to attract many candidates. The reasons behind this include a strict interpretation of Islam in the area, which prohibits women from exposing parts of their body, and the perception by young women in the area that joining the defence forces would discourage potential suitors from approaching them.⁶⁶

There are still strong reservations about women being assigned to combat positions, despite existing policies that allow women to participate on the front line

Secondly, there is strong resistance to changing the masculinist institutional culture of the KDF. In Kenya there are still strong reservations about women being assigned to combat positions, despite existing policies that allow women to participate on the front line. While women deployed in AMISOM and in Operation Linda Nchi were initially part of combat missions, these roles were slowly phased out after negative domestic backlash resulting from media coverage of women injured in action.⁶⁷ Calling attention to the cultural sensitivities about women being in harm's way results in an informal yet pervasive practice of keeping women away from combat roles. While they are still deployed to combat zones, women have been pushed back from physically engaging the enemy.⁶⁸

The de facto exclusion of women from active combat roles has devastating consequences for their career advancement. Specific military career paths



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STILL CONSTITUTE

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OF THE DEFENCE FORCES

and promotions are traditionally reserved for those with significant combat experience and there are few women in field leadership positions.⁶⁹ Even the career path of Brigadier Fatumah Ahmed, now the highest-ranking female officer in the KDF, remained within the boundaries of traditional gendered roles: staff officer in Audit Personnel Records, staff officer in Personnel and Administration, colonel personnel at the Kenya Air Force Headquarters, and managing director of the Defence Forces Medical Insurance Scheme.⁷⁰

Kenyan newspaper, *The Standard*, reported that women who came to a KDF recruitment drive in September 2015 were turned away: ‘An officer who spoke on condition of anonymity claimed women are weak and can not cope in an active combat. “Even those we already have are being taken to various courses like hospitality as they have shown they cannot participate in war,” the source said.’⁷¹ These social and institutional attitudes act as an initial gatekeeper for women’s inclusion in the military.

While they are still deployed to combat zones, women have been pushed back from physically engaging the enemy

Once women are recruited into the military, gender-blind or gender-neutral policies and guiding documents pose significant challenges for female personnel. As argued elsewhere, a gender-neutral approach to integrating women in the military does not mean that they are able to compete equally; women continue ‘to be seen as tokens or judged on masculine criteria’ leading to one of two things: ‘the masculinisation of women in the military or dissonance or attrition in situations where it places too much strain on women’.⁷² Human resource issues – such as pregnancy, maternity leave, breastfeeding, or separation from families at deployment – need to be addressed and codified in order to avoid superior officers or others making arbitrary decisions based on gender discriminatory attitudes.⁷³ A lack of resources to implement gender-related policies and specific gender mainstreaming activities is also an impediment,⁷⁴ explained by the low prioritisation of such policies and activities.⁷⁵ Family-unfriendly human resource policies can result in a loss of training opportunities and/or promotions.⁷⁶

The lack of substantive equality in the KDF, as a result of this weak internal policy base, is evident in the absence of women from key decision-making and leadership positions. There are currently no women occupying positions above the rank of brigadier in the entire defence force and the majority of women in the KDF are low-ranking officers, signalling the institutional challenges to career advancement for women in the military. One example of this situation is that candidates for promotion are more competitive if they have gone through some long-term training abroad or at the Defence Staff College. However, opportunities for women to be selected for such training courses remain limited, as do mentoring opportunities for women.⁷⁷



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Despite the KDF's Zero Tolerance to Sexual Violence Policy,⁷⁸ sexually based offences in the military continue to be underreported and poorly punished, not unlike the situation in many other armed forces around the world. With no special unit to investigate such allegations they are treated like any other misconduct. Moreover, with reporting going through the normal chain of command, many victims choose not to report cases of assault.⁷⁹ Extortion of female officers for sexual favours in return for promotions and opportunities for training often goes unpunished.⁸⁰ Research has shown that sexual harassment, gender-based violence and the abuse of power in the military is linked to loss of productivity and absenteeism.⁸¹ This can, in turn, reinforce pre-existing prejudice against women and their commitment and ability to serve in the military.

Once there is analysis based on empirical data, context-specific gender mainstreaming policies can be developed

It is therefore not surprising that in spite of the ideals of equal opportunities in the security sector women feel pressured to engage in more traditional careers in the military. The pressure is due to questions about women's place in and ability to contribute to the security sector, gender neutral policies and conditions of services, combat deployment challenges and promotion roadblocks.

Recommendations

- More qualitative and quantitative research is required to gather data on the participation, treatment, experiences and performance of women in the KDF in order to truly assess the impact of women in the armed forces and the challenges they face. As with most defence forces in East Africa, there needs to be a willingness on the part of the KDF to be transparent and cooperate with researchers requiring access to data. Only once there is analysis based on empirical data can context-specific gender mainstreaming policies be developed and implemented.
- The KDF needs to develop and implement an overarching gender strategy or policy that can guide the process of gender mainstreaming within the armed forces. The strategy or policy should be driven

and monitored at a high level and through a specific focal point.

- Adequate human and financial resources must be allocated to implement policies, standing orders and guiding documents effectively once they are revised in order to start transforming the substantive equality issues within the KDF.
- Recruitment approaches for female cadets need to be tailored to address local community concerns and the needs of specific ethno-religious groups.
- Specific measurement tools are needed to assess the recruitment, retention and advancement opportunities for female personnel,⁸² to determine whether targets have been met.

Conclusion

Since the passing of the new Constitution, the government of Kenya has been active in attempting to include more women in the security sector. The KDF itself has been pro-active in recruiting more women and has had some success in retaining female officers. While the leadership of the security sector remains dominated by men, with time and as more women enrol and stay in the KDF, there are likely to be more women in the military.

However, key challenges remain in improving the visibility of women in the KDF. While focusing on the numbers of women in the military remains relevant, stakeholders also need to push for changes in substantive equality – gender relations and sensitivities – in the institution.

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About the authors

Yolande Bouka is a research associate for the ISS Peace and Security Research Programme, specialising in the Great Lakes Region. She is a scholar in comparative politics and brings expertise on comparative foreign policy and regional dimensions of conflicts. She completed her PhD at the School of International Service at the American University in Washington, DC, specialising in comparative and regional studies, and international peace and conflict resolution.

Romi Sigsworth is currently a consultant for the ISS and editor of the African Security Review. She was the former ISS gender specialist in the executive director's office in Pretoria. Romi has a master's degree in women's studies from Oxford University.

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ISS Pretoria

Block C, Brooklyn Court
361 Veale Street
New Muckleneuk
Pretoria, South Africa
Tel: +27 12 346 9500
Fax: +27 12 460 0998

ISS Addis Ababa

5th Floor, Get House
Building, Africa Avenue
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Tel: +251 11 515 6320
Fax: +251 11 515 6449

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Route de Ouakam
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Fax: +221 33 860 3343

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