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Women Not Afraid of the Frontline

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South Africa is leading the pack, with women comprising 22 per cent of its National Defence Force while Botswana recently accepted the first female recruits after 20 years of pressure from gender activists.

The low level of participation of women in African militaries was in the limelight in August, which is celebrated in several parts of the continent as the month of heroines of the anti-colonial struggle.

As of February 2008, only five per cent of soldiers in the world were female. The figure is not any better for Africa, which behooves governments to increase the ratio of women in their disciplined forces and introduce gender-sensitive policies to empower female soldiers already in service.

Over the past 50 years, the role of women in the African military has changed considerably, with a number of females joining the military service. Despite this, women soldiers have been restricted to prescribed gender roles as nurses, cooks, secretaries and officers in personnel units.

In keeping with these gendered perceptions, studies in the military in Africa have constantly depicted women as victims and men as perpetrators of violence or protectors of women. Yet, women have been part and parcel of the warrior class in Africa.

The classic case is Dahomey (now Benin), where female warriors known as the Amazons formed part of the national defence. At one point, it is reported, the country had a 30,000-strong unit of infantry women.

Commenting on female warriors in Libya, the renowned Greek historian, Herodotus, wrote of men "whose wives drive their chariots to battle." The women warriors of the famous Monomotapa kingdom in modern Zimbabwe were hailed as "quick and swift, lively and courageous."

And, in certain cases, pre-colonial African women warriors passed on the baton of bravery to liberation veterans.

Writing on women liberation veterans who defied patriarchal restrictions, the famous theoretician, Frantz Fanon, documented the role of Algerian women in the national war of independence, even highlighting the revolutionary role of prostitutes as fighters.

In the Horn of Africa, the Eritrean People's Liberation Army (EPLA) is said to have comprised of about 40 per cent women fighters.

Kenya's Mau Mau liberation army recruited literate women into the forest fighting force as generals, fighters and strategists. One of them, Field Marshal Muthoni, is still alive.

Zimbabwe's vice president, Joice Mujuru, who went by the nom de guerre Teurai Ropa (spill blood) is hailed as a ferocious warrior who brought down a colonial military helicopter with an AK-47 assault rifle.

And General Thandi Modise is just but one of the heroines of South Africa's Unkhonto we Sizwe (the Spear of the Nation), who were subjected to the same training as their male counterparts, and were involved in combat in line with the African National Congress (ANC's) policy of non-sexism.

But now, the colonial perception of the military as a purely male institution and the post-colonial litany of coups, civil wars and instability have contributed to the small presence of women in the African military. Even now, things have not changed greatly.

To stem the persistent civil wars, coups and conflicts in the continent, the African Union (AU) has adopted the Common Africa Defence and Security Policy (CADSP) and set up the African Stand-by Force (ASF), made up of five regional brigades. But women remain on the fringes of this regional military structure.

Despite this, African countries have made some progress in ensuring gender balance in the military. Post-apartheid South Africa is leading the pack, with women comprising 22 per cent of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) -- higher than the

regional average of about 10.5 per cent.

But progress in ensuring gender equity in the forces has been slow. After 40 years of independence, the Botswana Defence Force (BDF) has just recruited its first women soldiers to private and officer ranks.

Regional armies

"It took 20 years of lobbying," says Ntombi Setshwaelo, the spokeswoman for Emang Basadi, a Botswana women's rights organisation.

How to fast-track women involvement in national and regional militaries was the subject of a recent meeting of top women military chiefs from the 14 Southern African Development Community (Sadc) countries, in Pretoria.

Women soldiers participating in the meeting underscored the gate-keeping role of human resource units in promoting the participation of women in national and regional armies.

Other African countries are also making tiny advances, including taking part in, or, hosting women soldiers involved in international peacekeeping.

Liberia now hosts the second Indian all-female peacekeeping force, the first having been deployed in 2007.

On its part, Malawi has deployed over 20 women to UN Peace Support Operations since 1994.

Beyond Sadc, Libya has drafted women into its army, with Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's bodyguard being a 200-strong female-only unit.

Figures on the ratio of women to men in African armies are hard to come by, but whatever glimpse there is indicates that some hard spade work is needed to reach gender equity.

For example, Egypt, Ethiopia, Morocco, Eritrea, Angola and Algeria-- the largest armies on the continent -- have over 1.5 million active duty uniformed troops but it is not clear how many of these are women.

Accurate figures of women's participation in national and regional military structures are critical to those working to ensure gender equity in this employment sector. Strong leadership and political will is needed at AU level to set specific quotas on equitable gender representation in national forces and the African standby force.

The inclusion of women in regional peacekeeping in particular brings in unique benefits. In hot spots experiencing sexual crimes against women such as the "food-for-sex" scandal involving the United Nations peacekeepers in the Democratic of Congo and Liberia, increased participation by women peacekeepers can provide a sense of security where male troops have failed.

At the international level, the tide is shifting in favour of more commitment to increased and improved participation of women in the military sector following the adoption of the United Nations Resolution 1325.

Peace keeping operations

Despite this, although the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations has been in existence for 60 years (1948-2008), only seven women have ever held the top post of Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG). Furthermore, according to a 2008 gender audit of women in peace keeping operations, only 1.9 per cent of military personnel are women.

As of October 2006, only seven out of 16 peacekeeping operations in countries such as Haiti and Sudan had a full-time gender adviser. The rest of the missions had gender focal points people dealing with gender issues.

This skewed representation of women in UN peacekeeping, mirrors the gender imbalance within the UN bureaucracy. The only one female head of mission and four women deputies in the UN system were based in Africa (Burundi, Chad, Liberia, and Sudan).

Some major players in the international system are facing pressure to increase the number of female combatants in their forces, albeit with deep resistance.

China, as the world's largest army with over 1.2 million troops does not have many women on the frontlines. India, the second largest, has a small contingent of 2.65 per cent while Britain and the US have approximately 15 per cent and 14 per cent women within their forces, respectively.

Women's struggle for equal representation in the armed forces, however, is facing resistance from male counterparts. In the armed forces women are excluded on the basis of biological and physical reasons.

In the Sadc, some countries do not have operational equipment that is suitable for women. Items as basic as bullet proof vests are not designed for large-breasted women and, in addition, some fighter jet seats do not accommodate large-hipped women.

Adjustments in budget, technology as well as clearly defined career paths and equal salaries are necessary to put women soldiers at the same level as their male colleagues.

With new emphasis on strategy and electronic technology, the frontline has receded significantly with less dependency on physical force and presence in the battlefields. Women military personnel do not, therefore, have to take part in combat.

Those with the appropriate strategic knowledge and technical competence can still be part and parcel of this new system of warfare. But with Africa's continued heavy reliance on the physical form of defence and low technology, women are likely to remain in the military office blocks typing out letters.

Violence against women

The 30 per cent target for women's involvement at all levels of decision making within Africa, set by the Prevention and Eradication of Violence against Women and Children, should be extended to armed forces and peacekeeping operations.

Notably, following the adoption of the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality (2003) and the implementation of the parity principle within all AU structures, this proportion has been revised upwards to 50:50.

But Africa has to walk the talk implementing the spirit of these documents. Bridging rhetoric and reality is central to improving the position of women in the national, regional and international armies.

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