

South African Female Peacekeepers on Mission in Africa

Progress, Challenges and Policy Options for Increased Participation

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South Africa's contribution of troops to peace missions is the 13th largest in the world, and the country has the largest women's contingent deployed in Peace Support Operations (PSOs). Although, South Africa is one of only a handful of countries incorporating women in combat positions and PSOs, on average the picture of female participation remains less rosy.

On the policy level, South Africa has committed itself to gender mainstreaming in the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000). The UN Resolution on Women, Peace and Security calls for, among other things, full inclusion of women in all aspects of peace-related activities, including peacekeeping. On 31 October 2010, the world will mark the 10th anniversary of Resolution 1325, just as in 2009 South Africa celebrated ten years of participation in international peacekeeping operations. This is a pertinent time to take stock of South Africa's progress in improving the gender balance

in its military, specifically in its contribution to PSOs, and the opportunities and obstacles that exist in this process.

This Policy Note is based on information collected from questionnaires, interviews and reports, along with insights gleaned from discussion groups at the 2007 SANDF Women's Day Conference to identify the progress of, and challenges to the SANDF in improving the gender balance in its peacekeeping activities. These initial research findings form part of a larger project on South African involvement in peacekeeping, focusing in particular on the status, position and role of women decision-makers and peacekeepers. Problems encountered by women peacekeepers and the challenges faced by the SANDF are not unique and the recommendations may therefore be of relevance beyond South Africa, particularly to those African countries across the continent attempting to attract more women into, and mainstream gender in the military and PSOs.

UNSC Resolution 1325, SANDF and Female Peacekeepers

UN Resolution 1325 points to the increasing importance of the role and position of women in conflict, and in approaches to peacemaking, peacekeeping and peace building.¹ The resolution has a twin focus, first on women as actors (subjects), recognising their contribution to conflict resolution and sustainable peace and calling for the inclusion of more women in peacekeeping operations. Second, it emphasises the situation of women as victims (objects), recognising the negative impact of war and violence on vulnerable groups – mainly women and children. The resolution calls for the mainstreaming of gender in peace operations and the full participation of women in decision-making and all peace support activities. There remains, in the words of Olsson and Tryggestad (2001:3), a 'gap in

the knowledge concerning women and peacekeeping – as opposed to men and peacekeeping'. Bringing the role of women peacekeepers into the picture provides valuable information about gender and the areas to be addressed in order to create more holistic, representative and therefore successful peace missions.

Internationally, the impact and success of gender balancing and gender mainstreaming in peace missions have been limited, despite the good intentions of the UN and many of its member states. Despite the initial attraction of the concept of gender mainstreaming arising from its goal of gender equity and its consequent susceptibility to bureaucratic strategies, attempts at implementation have overall been disappointing when measured against the realities of women's lives in many parts of the world and the continuing exclusion of women from decision-making positions. Furthermore, attracting larger numbers of women into the military has remained difficult for most countries. The number of female peacekeepers internationally has been growing at a snail's pace since 2000, with the exception of the civilian component of peace-

1. The terms 'peace missions', 'peacekeeping' and 'peace support operations' are used interchangeably in this policy brief, as are the terms 'women peacekeepers/soldiers' and 'female peacekeepers/soldiers'.

keeping, in which women now account for 25 per cent of personnel. The lack of women in leadership and decision-making positions is of special concern. By mid-2008 only one of 37 Special Representatives of the UN Secretary-General (SRSGs) was a woman. On average, only 2.4 per cent of signatories to peace agreements are women and no women have been appointed chief or lead peace mediators in UN-sponsored peace talks (UNIFEM 2009), although the African Union appointed Graca Machel as one of three mediators in the Kenya crisis of 2008. By August 2009, only 86 of 2,045 staff officers in UN missions were women and of the troop contingents, only 1,905 out of 77,640 (UN DPKO 2009). Women comprise only 8 per cent of the police contingents in international peace operations.

According to the SANDF annual review for 2007-08, 21 per cent of its uniformed staff are women. This represents an initial steady increase over time, but the 20 per cent level had already been reached in 2002: moving beyond this ceiling is clearly difficult and poses a serious challenge for the SANDF. Furthermore, the absence of women in senior decision-making positions is generally acknowledged as being problematic: only five of 29 top management positions are held by women, though it should be noted that the Ministry of Defence is currently headed by a woman, Lindiwe Sisulu, thereby emphasising the government's commitment to gender equality. The involvement of women in peacekeeping deployments is substantially lower than 21 per cent, though well above the international average, according to senior SANDF staff interviewed. Unfortunately no hard figures were provided. Estimates based on documentary evidence put this figure at no higher than 5 per cent. One potential pool for recruiting women peacekeepers is the recently introduced SANDF Military Skills Development System (MSDS) focusing on youth to ensure a constant output of suitably qualified, fit and healthy young soldiers. The two-year programme is specifically aimed at contributing towards SANDF participation in PSOs. The programme aims at a 40 per cent annual female intake (in 2007-08 it was 31 per cent – significantly higher than the percentage of women in the SANDF).

Resolution 1325 rests, at least partly and implicitly, on the assumption that women have a certain affinity with peace, and that their participation in efforts to resolve conflict peacefully (whether at the peace table, in peace missions, or in post-conflict reconstruction and development) facilitates such processes. Available literature on the role of women peacekeepers makes it clear that they are perceived as fulfilling at least three roles specifically as women (moving beyond an 'add women and stir' approach that concentrates mainly on 'head counting'). The first is that they are required for specific tasks that sometimes relate to cultural differences. These tasks involve facilitating investigations of gender-based violence, performing body searches on women, interrogating women and gathering intelligence among local women. To these could be added the fact that women are often considered to be more approachable and less threatening by local populations (including men).

A second role ascribed to women peacekeepers is that of monitoring excessive conduct among male soldiers.

As Valenius (2007:38) points out, this assumption (that women can somehow act as 'civilisers' of male behaviour) is dubious both in terms of the efficacy of women in this role and morally, as it implies a shift in responsibility for men's conduct to women. The fact is, though, that larger numbers of women will most probably change the ethos of peace operations from being conducted within a largely military/war paradigm into more holistic approaches to peacemaking, peacekeeping and peace building, in which the inclusion and role of women will become normalised.

A third role ascribed to female peacekeepers is as role models for the local population. Both the first and third roles point to the direct contact between women as subjects and as objects. It could be argued that it is in these spheres in particular that the inclusion of women in peace missions becomes imperative. If one assumes that changing gender relations is crucial to building lasting peace, then the symbolic presence of women in peace missions ('conquering the ultimate male bastion') that are tasked with keeping peace and assisting in post-conflict reconstruction and development becomes crucial to change in conflict and post-conflict societies.² Several authors have commented on the fact that the deployment of an all-female police contingent (from India) in the peace mission in Liberia resulted in a threefold increase in the number of women applicants for the local police service within the first year of the contingent's deployment (see, e.g., Guéhenno 2007).

Challenges to gender balancing in the SANDF

The first challenge is the discrepancy between the percentage of SANDF women serving as peacekeepers (less than 5 per cent) and the percentage of uniformed women in the SANDF (21 per cent). Furthermore, the MSDS programme aimed at recruiting new soldiers has had to be curtailed during the 2007-08 financial year because of resource constraints in the SANDF. Apart from the problem that the pool from which to draw female peacekeepers is small, a number of issues were identified that inhibit women from volunteering for peacekeeping.

The second challenge is that of the persistent stereotypes of the roles that men and women are expected or believed to play or exhibit in society: this relates to the definition of gender as a product of structural relations between men and women in society in terms of which roles and behavioural expectations are created (Valenius 2007:11-13). In background discussions during preparations for the questionnaire, several officers expressed the

2. It is worth quoting at length from the UN DPKO annual review of 2006:

The increased level of women serving ... combined with the establishment of gender offices to ensure the integration of a gender perspective into all aspects of peacekeeping – has contributed to the empowerment of women in countries hosting peacekeeping missions. These gains can be seen in the fact that in these ... countries, more women are voting and running for office. Constitutions are being revised to uphold the principle of equal rights of women and girls; discriminatory legislation is being revised; women's advocacy groups are being strengthened; women are becoming increasingly represented in the police and civil service.

view that women were not 'mentally strong' and could not be expected to be deployed in combat or dangerous situations. Women were, in short, just not equal to men in a military environment. Women, including women soldiers, are perceived by many male soldiers as being weak and in need of protection. The fact that their vulnerability could be changed by training them to fill combat positions like their male counterparts is something these officers have not thought about: vulnerability and weakness is often the product of a person's position in a social hierarchy and not of her/his sex.

From this problem of stereotyping a number of practical problems stem. The first is that in many instances of peace operations, women peacekeepers are still confined to support positions and therefore to the military base. The area outside the camp is perceived to be 'too dangerous' for women and they are not included in duties and activities outside the base. Several women respondents complained that they had been denied equal treatment and opportunities for gaining valuable practical experience. Some of the male respondents commented that women were treated differently and were not expected to perform 'dangerous' duties. Decisions as to 'who does what' are made by senior and commanding officers, but the effects of such decisions resonate with all soldiers, reinforcing traditional perceptions about what the 'proper' roles and capabilities of the sexes are. It was interesting to correlate responses to specific duties during deployment with responses to questions about contributions and strengths: the women soldiers seemed to have very little confidence in their ability to 'make the local population feel safer'. The way in which these women soldiers were deployed reinforced perceptions of the peacekeeping environment as a warlike and therefore 'male' domain, and provided little if any opportunity for female soldiers to contribute to the process and to fulfil roles considered important to the success of peace missions.

A second and pervasive problem is that women soldiers believe there is insufficient support for them when it comes to peacekeeping deployment (although their complaints were also expressed more widely in the SANDF). Several specific issues were brought up in response to the questionnaires and during interviews and discussion groups at the Women's Day Conference. In a nutshell, these complaints largely arose from perceptions of a lack of support for, and encouragement to women peacekeepers by their superiors.

Women complained of 'anti-retention' strategies, meaning that senior (male) officers actively discouraged them from volunteering for peacekeeping. They also mentioned as problematic the absence of senior female officers in decision-making positions and the lack of role models. These women recommended a quota system for female peacekeepers, the establishment of a database of suitable women for deployment and opportunities for networking and mutual support. To these complaints and recommendations could be added some very practical problems, such as lack of facilities to cater for women's special needs during deployment, the problem of long absences from home

(especially in the case of women soldiers with families and young children) and the fact that often upon their return they experienced family problems. Interestingly, the latter two complaints (long absences and family problems) were also voiced by male participants: once one sifts through the research data, it becomes obvious that men and women peacekeepers actually have many similarities, though these are never emphasised as much as are the differences between them.

In exploring issues of gender awareness, mainstreaming and training, a number of problems were identified. Few peacekeepers (and female peacekeepers even less so) seemed to be aware of Resolution 1325 and the reasons for including women in peace operations. Many respondents could not recall any of the content of their 'gender training' during pre-deployment training. Interviewees opined that not enough time and attention was devoted to gender training, which was largely treated as a rather superficial 'add-on', rather than an integral part of training.

Another problem that cropped up repeatedly during discussions with senior officers, decision-makers and other experts, related to debriefing, lessons learned and formalised linkages between the various phases and activities involved in peacekeeping, ranging from planning to implementation, and including preparation for deployment and harvesting the knowledge gained from the experiences of peacekeepers. According to some interviewees, a debriefing and lessons-learned cycle has been established, but is not functioning efficiently. One reason offered for the apparent failure of the process is that debriefing upon return from a mission does not work because peacekeepers at that point are only interested in going home to their families. They are therefore not keen to get involved in such activities. Yet some peacekeepers (women) expressed the wish for an opportunity to share their experiences and the knowledge gained with 'first time' peacekeepers, believing that they had valuable advice to give and that their observations could make for more efficient and rewarding experiences and contributions.

Peacekeeping presents a different and, in many ways, a much more complicated paradigm than the conventional military or 'war-making' approach. The peacekeeping paradigm, exactly because of this difference, provides an opportunity for thinking about and incorporating women peacekeepers in a way that enhances and facilitates the advantages and strengths they bring to peacekeeping.

The very tasks and functions of peacekeepers demand a much larger and more prominent role for women in all aspects of these missions. Sound and positive recruitment strategies, comprehensive training and full inclusion of women in all facets of these missions would contribute not only to more successful peace operations, but also, in the long term, to healthier and more inclusive societies that better represent the needs and aspirations of all their people.

It should be emphasised that the research data were gained from a rather small sample of peacekeepers and a small number of interviews, and only scratch the surface of peacekeeping experiences. Nevertheless, the problems

above point to at least three broad areas demanding attention: research, recruitment and training.

Recommendations to the SANDF

- Lack of information is the largest obstacle. There should be more support and encouragement for research on the experiences of peacekeepers, with a strong focus on the experiences, recruitment and work environment of women peacekeepers. Research partnerships with the academic community in South Africa and between the SANDF and South African Police Service could supplement SANDF capacity and provide valuable knowledge of, and insight into the demands and requirements of peace operations. Comparative studies between South Africa and other African countries would strengthen the continent's peacekeeping capacity and efficiency and could feed into the African Union's efforts to mainstream gender in PSOs. The emphasis should be on empirical, and field research and participatory research during missions should be facilitated.
- Encourage interaction between decision-makers and researchers in order to stimulate discussion of research findings, identify best practices and design a de-briefing strategy that would ensure that lessons learned are incorporated into the planning and implementation phases of peace operations. Specific attention should be paid to the debriefing of gender advisers in peace missions.
- Focus on recruitment strategies that would make women and their role in, and importance to the SANDF and peacekeeping more visible and attractive within the force and also within the broad public sphere. Developing a vibrant relationship with the media is one way in which the role of women as soldiers and peacekeepers could be profiled to encourage women to take up a career in the SANDF. The SANDF should pay much more attention to media relations and to making the public aware of the achievements of its soldiers (male and female) in their peacekeeping activities.
- Recruitment strategies should also target universities and other institutions of higher learning in order to inform young women about the SANDF and attract them into its ranks. This could be accomplished through an annual 'road-show' showcasing the achievements and experiences of young professional women soldiers.
- The recruitment of SANDF female personnel into peacekeeping missions could be advanced in a number of practical ways, the most important being paying attention to the practical concerns and needs of women peacekeepers during deployment (better facilities) and communicating such improvements to women soldiers.
- The content and methodology of gender-training courses need to be scrutinised and adapted, changed or redesigned if necessary. The issue of equality, and the meaning of mainstreaming in particular, should receive attention. Such scrutiny should be ongoing and interactive, involving trainers, consultants or other experts with knowledge of international trends and practices and, crucially, a sampling of those who

had undergone training. Gender training should be given more attention and time (half-day or fragmented presentations do not amount to in-depth and comprehensive training). There should be separate training for troops and senior officers, as well as jointly for both groups, since the training of mission commanders and other senior officers is crucial to the success of mainstreaming gender within a mission.

- Specific attention should be paid to specialised training for women soldiers in order to increase the pool of senior women for leadership positions, including in peace missions.
- The MSDS programme should be prioritised as a focal point for gender mainstreaming and training. Sufficient resources should be allocated to this innovative strategy for the rejuvenation and professionalisation of the SANDF.

Recommendations to the donor community

- Support research on the role and experiences of women peacekeepers and the perceptions and attitudes of their male colleagues.
- Support contact and joint research projects on gender and/within peacekeeping/peace support operations within African defence forces and police services.
- Support the SANDF MSDS programme.
- Support the specialised and comprehensive training of select women soldiers with a view to their promotion into senior decision-making positions within the SANDF.

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