

# Security Reform Key To Protecting Women

*Training, recruitment and prosecutions can reduce violence*

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*A female soldier in the government army in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: New staffing, improved training and other reforms are needed so that Africa's security forces can better protect women.*

Photograph: Reuters / Alissa Everett

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The massacre of nearly 200 opposition demonstrators in Conakry, Guinea, in late September 2009 shocked Africa

and the world. Beyond the sheer brutality of the crackdown, one feature was particularly stunning to many survivors and observers —

the systematic rape of scores of women.

“We didn’t know the soldiers were going to harm us,” one injured

woman said to a foreign reporter. A 35-year-old teacher later told investigators for the New York–based Human Rights Watch that members of the elite Presidential Guard grabbed her. “Two held me down while the other raped me.... Then the second one raped me, then the third.”

Sadly, the experiences of these Guinean women are not isolated cases. Sexual and other violence against women has been a feature of conflicts across Africa, from Sierra Leone and Liberia to Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Even in countries not at war,

women are commonly raped, beaten and victimized in other ways. Only rarely do police or prosecutors take such crimes seriously. Even worse, policemen and soldiers — whose job supposedly is to protect citizens — have all too often been among the abusers.

Here and there, however, steps are being taken to reform Africa’s security institutions to increase their ability — and willingness — to safeguard women. Police in Liberia, Sierra Leone and South Africa now have specialized units on sexual and domestic violence,

while Liberia has courts dedicated to prosecuting sexual crimes.

A number of countries are recruiting more women into their police forces, and to a lesser extent into their armies. That has helped to change their exclusively male cultures and has pushed them to take gender-based violence more seriously. In the DRC, where rape has been exceptionally widespread in the war-torn eastern provinces, scores of government soldiers — who once enjoyed virtual impunity — are finally facing military tribunals, with some receiving long sentences for rape and other crimes against civilians.

## Twin Approach

But such improvements remain limited, notes Ecoma Alaga, an expert on gender and security sector reform (SSR) for the non-governmental Women Peace and Security Network–Africa (WIPSEN–Africa), headquartered in Accra, Ghana. Especially in countries marked by armed conflict, violence against women has been increasing, with rape

often used as a weapon of war, she explains in a paper presented to a 15 September seminar in New York organized by the UN’s Office of the Special Adviser on Africa (OSAA).

Frequently, Ms. Alaga points out, the security sector in Africa “finds itself falling short in its responsibility” to protect women, and “is itself often a direct threat

to the security of women.” While it is imperative to overhaul Africa’s security sectors generally, to make them more effective and responsive to citizens’ concerns, it is especially important for such reforms to put more emphasis on overcoming gender discrimination and on protecting women, she argues.



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*A theatre group in the Congo performing a scene on violence against women, to educate people more widely about the social scourge.*

Photograph: UN / Marie Frechon

For that to happen, Ms. Alaga maintains, a “twin approach” is required. On the one hand, those who design and carry out security reforms need to pay greater attention to gender issues and to actively involve women in all phases of reform programs. On the other hand, women’s groups must themselves stop viewing security as “men’s business” and insist on a greater voice and role in deciding how armies, police, courts and other institutions are restructured.

Such a process will not be easy, said Adedeji Ebo, who chairs the UN’s inter-agency task force on security sector reform. Africa’s armies and police forces were originally set up when most of the continent was under colonial rule, he noted at the OSAA seminar. So at the outset they “were never created to protect Africans,” but were instead viewed by the

colonial authorities as instruments for extracting taxes and for “keeping the natives in check.” Even after independence, Mr. Ebo added, many African governments perpetuated or recreated similar security structures.

But as more African countries seek to rebuild after debilitating wars or to democratize repressive political systems, more are also trying to professionalize their armies, police forces, intelligence services and court systems. The ultimate aim is to bring their security sectors under the control of elected civilian leaders and to make them more attentive to popular aspirations.

Yet so far, argues Ms. Alaga, SSR efforts in Africa have been top-down and “elitist.” They also have been confined to specific institutions rather than tackling the security sector as a whole and have

focused mainly on technical and logistical issues, not on the more fundamental questions of how the army, police and courts are governed. Gender concerns have been incorporated only sporadically.

“The protection of women requires a comprehensive system-wide approach,” Ms. Alaga insists. For violence to decline, security forces must ensure basic public safety, police need to investigate and apprehend perpetrators and courts must bring to trial and imprison those found guilty. The current “piecemeal” approach to SSR has brought some partial gains, Ms. Alaga acknowledges. Moreover, these efforts highlight the kind of measures that can significantly improve conditions for women if they are pursued more systematically.

## Cleaning Out The Ranks

In countries where armies have been especially notorious for

brutalizing civilians, one of the most obvious reform measures is

to rid them of personnel guilty of serious abuses.



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*Graduates of the police academy in Liberia: Under President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the country has set quotas for recruiting more women into both its police force and army.*

Photograph: UN / Christopher Herwig

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After more than a decade of civil war, Liberia began building a new army in 2006. Although members of the old government armed

forces and of demobilized rebel groups were permitted to apply, the selection criteria were very rigorous. “Vetting” panels assessed

the qualifications of each applicant, turning away anyone known to have engaged in abuses. The names and photos of

applicants were published and circulated in local communities, and the general public was invited to come forth with any information that would disqualify a candidate. In the end, three quarters were rejected.

In the DRC a peace agreement in 2002 also provided for the creation of a new national army. But the process of vetting the ranks was much more limited than in Liberia. Often entire units from the previous factions were incorporated into the new Forces armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC), with only a few of the most notorious officers excluded or subject to criminal charges.

Despite the peace accord, fighting has continued in the DRC's eastern provinces between the FARDC and a complex array of dissident factions, local militia groups and foreign fighters (mostly from neighboring Rwanda and Uganda). Many Congolese villagers have been killed and hundreds of thousands have been displaced from their homes. Women often have been brutalized and raped.

## Training And Staffing

As General Monzili emphasizes, training is important for changing the outlooks and conduct of military and police personnel. Draft legislation currently before the Congolese legislature proposes a range of reforms for the FARDC and national police, including restructuring, changes in command methods, and training in technical and "moral" subjects. Instructors from MONUC and the European Union who have been working with Congolese army and police units already teach courses on human rights and gender issues.

Similarly, in Burundi, Liberia, Sierra Leone and South Africa,

Monitors from the UN and human rights organizations ascribe much of the abuse to anti-government groups. But they frequently cite evidence that undisciplined soldiers from the FARDC have also raped, pillaged and killed — with little fear of punishment.

In June 2009 President Joseph Kabila proclaimed a "zero tolerance" policy for the FARDC. Henceforth, he vowed, any soldier, "whatever his rank," involved in theft, rape, human rights abuses or a failure to protect civilians would be arrested and brought before military courts. Scores of rank-and-file FARDC soldiers have been tried. In late July, 10 officers also were found guilty of rape and other war crimes by a military tribunal in Rutshuru, in the province of North Kivu.

But the Congolese army still has a long way to go before it can be transformed into a force that respects the rights of women and other citizens. In November UN investigators confirmed that FARDC troops had killed some 60 civilians in one incident alone

reports Ms. Alaga, questions of women's rights and gender-based violence have been integrated into military and police curricula and training programs.

While essential, training on its own can have only a limited impact in transforming the orientation of overwhelmingly male security forces. Changes in staffing are also vital, advocates for women's rights argue, both to alter the overall culture of those structures and to carry out particular tasks to help protect women. There are some roles that "women alone can perform to enhance the institutions' operational effectiveness," Ms. Alaga argues.

during an offensive against Rwandan rebels in early 2009. That same month, peacekeepers of the UN Mission in the DRC (MONUC) suspended all support for army units involved in such killings. A report by a UN expert group in late November cited even more evidence of killings, rapes and illegal mining operations by FARDC commanders and troops.

Citing "lack of progress in the area of security sector reform" in a December 2009 report, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon urged the Congolese authorities to thoroughly vet the FARDC and bring to justice those involved in serious abuses.

General Monzili Zabili, a veteran Congolese army commander, estimates that it will take at least three years of intensive training and restructuring to create a truly "republican army." What exists now, he says, is a "regroupment of several private militias" that were brought together after peace accords but not yet fully integrated into a cohesive, disciplined army.

Liberia — which produced Africa's first democratically elected female president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf — has made especially pronounced efforts to change the gender composition of security forces. When recruitment for the new national army commenced, President Johnson-Sirleaf announced a goal of achieving a military that would be 20 per cent female. But it proved difficult to find enough women willing to enlist who could also meet the minimum qualification of a high school education. The actual proportion of female army recruits is currently around 5 per cent.

Greater progress has been made in the Liberian National Police, for which the target was also 20 per cent. With the help of nearly 60 female instructors from the UN peacekeeping mission, the first all-female class of police cadets graduated in 2009, bringing the force's total proportion of women to 12 per cent. Earlier the president named a woman, Beatrice Munah Sieh, as inspector general of police.

## Legal Action

While African conflicts hold particular dangers for women, abuse is also common in countries at "peace." Even in the DRC, only an estimated 3 per cent of all rapes and other sexual assaults nationwide are perpetrated by members of armed groups. To counter the broader scourge of such violence, the police and courts must become more active and effective in pursuing such crimes.

But across Africa, women's access to justice remains very limited. The reasons include the weakness of the courts (which scarcely exist outside the larger towns), high

To further improve female recruitment into the Liberian police without compromising the educational requirements, an "accelerated learning" program was introduced. Young women applicants who have not completed a secondary education are enrolled at a local polytechnic school to obtain their certificates.

South Africa, which has been recruiting female troops and police

court fees, corruption and ignorance of the law by potential plaintiffs, lawyers and even judges.

But some improvements are under way. In a number of countries, including Rwanda, laws on rape and sexual violence have been strengthened in recent years. Liberia, Sierra Leone and South Africa have established specialized units within their police forces to investigate such crimes, and Liberia has set up a special court (the Circuit Court E) to hear cases of sexual violence. Guinea-Bissau has introduced gender-training programs for magistrates.

since it started restructuring its security forces in the mid-1990s, has recently increased its quota for both institutions to 40 per cent in an effort to speed the process. After a "gender mainstreaming" audit highlighted shortcomings at the command levels of the South African National Defence Force, eight female brigadier generals were appointed in 2007.

Since 2007 new legal aid clinics have been operating in the Congolese province of North Kivu to help women and their families seek justice. "Each month, we record about 30 cases of rape," reports Eugène Buzake, a lawyer with the non-governmental Synergie pour l'assistance juridique (SAJ), "and we direct the victims to the courts." The group provides free legal advice, arranges protection for witnesses and helps transport them to court appearances. Some military prosecutors are now seeking the SAJ's involvement, to help improve the prospects of winning convictions.

## Social Engagement

As this example illustrates, greater involvement by civil society groups, women's organizations and other social actors can be vital in countering violence against women. Civil society groups can put pressure on security forces to correct shortcomings and take more energetic action. In South Africa in the late 1990s, women's organizations were invited to participate in a public review of the country's defense structures and policies. In the process they helped expose problems ranging

from the environmental impact of military activities to sexual harassment of women by army personnel.

More broadly, violence against women is a societal problem and cannot be curbed by security institutions alone, notes Anne Marie Goetz, a governance and security adviser with the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). Much of the violence, she told the OSAA seminar, takes place in the family and other

"private spaces," and is therefore difficult to police. Moreover, she added, the "wide tolerance of abuses" prevalent in many societies in turn makes it harder to transform the security institutions.

Another hurdle is women's generally subordinate position in society. In Sierra Leone, according to a study by WIPSEN-Africa, some women who sought to join the police or army — and who met all the selection qualifications — were ultimately "ordered" by their

husbands not to take up the positions open to them.

Getting Africa's security institutions to better protect women and advancing women's overall social and political status thus go hand-in-hand, Kristin Valasek of the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces told the OSAA seminar. Both require the integration of

women into the highest levels of national decision-making and the mobilization of women's associations and civil society groups locally.

Action at the grassroots is especially vital, argues Joséphine Pumbulu, who is in charge of women's and children's rights for the Association africaine de défense des droits de l'homme in

the DRC. Her group promotes women's rights in schools, churches, marketplaces and other public venues across the country, and also presses the government, army and police to safeguard women from violence. She urges Congolese women to more vocally "denounce the rapists" and vows that as long as women's rights are not upheld, "we are not going to cross our arms."

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