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Crossing Gender Boundaries or Challenging Masculinities? Female Combatants in the Kenya Defence Forces' (KDF) War against Al-Shabaab Militants

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Date of publication: June 21st, 2015

Edition period: June 2015-October 2015

To cite this article: Mokua, O. (2015). Crossing Gender Boundaries or Challenging Masculinities? Female Combatants in the Kenya Defence Forces' (KDF) War against Al-Shabaab Militants. *Masculinities and Social Change*, 4(2), 163-185. doi: 10.17583/MCS.2015.1510

To link this article: <http://doi.org/10.17583/MCS.2015.1510>

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Crossing Gender Boundaries or Challenging Masculinities? Female Combatants in the Kenya Defence Forces' (KDF) War against Al-Shabaab Militants

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Abstract

Few institutions have historically presented more defined gender boundaries than the military. This study examines gender and war through the lens of military combat roles. Military combat roles have traditionally relied on and manipulated ideas about masculinity and femininity. Women arrive in the army with different types of capital and bring with them a shared cultural 'tool kit' (womanhood). Following the military's labour allocation process, they are assigned combat roles, which is at variance to their gendered character. Assignment in non-traditional feminine roles means crossing gender boundaries. Ethnographic studies of the Kenya Defence Forces operations in Somalia reveal the different gendered characteristics of the military roles as reflected in the women's soldiery experiences. The encounter with military power and authority challenges the women soldiers to redefine their feminine capital, to interpret the military reality via a gendered lens and, therefore, to critically (re)examine the patriarchal order. Grounded on the twin theoretical frameworks of socio-cultural capitals and cultural scripts, and framed on a gendered structure of women's roles, the study illustrates the complex and contradictory realities of women in the military. The study unpacks the relationship between masculinity and femininity, and, war and the military. It underpins the value of the female soldier as a figurative illustration of the complex interrelations between the gendered politics of masculinity and femininity. It considers what the acts, practices and performances constitutive of female combatants reveal about particular modes of governance, regulation and politics that arise from the sacrifices of females in the military.

Keywords: women combatants, war, femininity, masculinity

¿Cruzar las Fronteras del Género o Masculinidades Desafiantes? Las Combatientes Femeninas en la Guerra de las Fuerzas de Defensa de Kenia (KDF) contra los Militantes de Al-Shabaab

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Resumen

Pocas instituciones han presentado históricamente límites de género más definidos que la militar. Este estudio examina el género y la guerra a partir de los roles de combate militar. Las funciones de combate militares han dependido tradicionalmente de ideas sobre la masculinidad y la feminidad. Las mujeres llegan al ejército con diferentes tipos de capital y traen consigo una 'caja de herramientas' compartida culturalmente. Siguiendo el proceso de asignación de trabajo de los militares, se les asigna funciones de combate que es contraria a su carácter de género. La asignación de roles femeninos no tradicionales implican unas fronteras de género cruzadas. Los estudios etnográficos de las Fuerzas de Defensa de Kenia en Somalia revelan las diferentes características de género de los roles militares como se refleja en las experiencias de la tropa de las mujeres. El encuentro con el poder militar y autoridad desafía a las mujeres soldados para redefinir su capital femenino, para interpretar la realidad militar a través de un lente de género y, por tanto, (re) examinar el orden patriarcal. Fundamentada en los marcos teóricos del capital socio-cultural y estructurado en un encuadre de género de las funciones militares de las mujeres, el estudio pone de manifiesto las realidades complejas y contradictorias de las mujeres en el ejército. El estudio descomprime la relación entre la masculinidad y la feminidad, y, la guerra y los militares. Se basa el valor de la mujer soldado como una ilustración figurativa de las complejas interrelaciones entre la política de género de la masculinidad y la feminidad. Considera lo que los actos, prácticas y actuaciones constitutivas de soldado de sexo femenino revelan acerca de los modos particulares de gobierno y la regulación y la política que se derivan de los sacrificios de los soldados en combate.

Palabras clave: mujeres combatientes, guerra, feminidad, masculinidad

2015 Hipatia Press

ISSN: 2014-3605

DOI: 10.17583/MCS.1510

Hipatia Press

www.hipatiapress.com



The military is a significant institution. Together with operating national security functions it performs other important functions including as a symbol of nationhood and source of national identity. Additionally, it occupies a special place in the public realm, somehow more intimately bound to patriotism, to the fate and dignity of the nation than other public monuments. However, the military remains fundamentally gendered as mainly masculine. It is the strongest vestige of the gendered conception of citizenship. The military contributes to national and cultural definitions of what it means to be a man by furthering a ‘cult of masculinity,’ as defined by the warrior hero. This ‘cult of masculinity’ includes constructions of acceptable gender roles, embedded within a ‘combat, masculine-warrior paradigm’ (Wright, 2014; Dunivin, 1994; Lorber, 1990).

Masculinity, Femininity and Militarism

In spite of the integration of women into the military, soldiering, violence and wars typify masculinity (Faludi, 1994; Melissa, 1998; Snyder, 1999). The military and militarism provide the moral, legal and even metaphysical justification, freedom and symbolism for the expression of masculinization par excellence or that, which is distinctly and uniquely masculine. Notions of masculinity are powerful tools in the process of making soldiers (Cock, 1991; Mama, 1998). Military formations are constructed around a particular form of masculinity that idealise raw power, strength, lethal force, aggression, competitiveness, censure of emotional expression and the creation and dehumanisation of the ‘enemy’ (Braudy, 2005; Dudink et.al., 2004; Enloe, 2000; Higate, 2003; Hopton, 2003). Militarism feeds into ideologies of masculinity through the eroticization of stoicism, risk-taking, physical toughness, boldness and endurance. Militarization is also variously expressed in such masculine attributes as self-discipline, professionalism, sociability, overt heterosexual desire, protection and decisiveness, individualism, rationality and practicality, courage and semblance of comradeship, cruelty, mindlessness, blind obedience and clannishness (Ekiyor, 2002; Esuruku, 2011; Yaliwe, 2008).

In addition, traditional and cultural African understandings of masculinity and femininity, grant agency to male soldiers, regardless of

their military role, by normalising the image of the combative soldier as man and ensuring that infantry women remain liminal to the military's violent and primary function. Femininity is thus constructed in opposition to that of the combatant soldier. This ultimately defines the social being of women. No matter their contribution to the military, the embodiment of femininity means that women are excluded from these essentially male and masculine formations. Women's soldiering in the frames of violence and war, is a worthy, albeit culturally anomalous sacrifice.

Equally, military values, ideologies and patterns of behaviour symbolize patriarchy. Ideologies of idealized masculinity valorise and epitomise that which is manly, thus creating an iconic male figure. Being a soldier is purposefully linked to being a 'real man'. The values, attitudes, actions, thinking and modes of behaviour which are most appreciated within the military are connected to stereotypical construction of male and female relations. They are built on a gender division of labour. The military taps on masculine assets of soldiering by contrasting them with images of femininity (Enloe, 2000). Traditional African gender notions of patriarchy entrench women as appendages of males. Women are characterized in relation to their traditional/cultural roles of mothers, sisters, wives, daughters, and therefore nurturers, carers, homemakers, and life-givers, in contrast to reference of their professional abilities and training. While these roles are important in themselves, they are seen as only relevant in relation to the male roles of providers, leaders and decision-makers. Femininity is thus equated with weakness, vulnerability and feebleness (Ekiyor, 2002; Esuruku, 2011; Yaliwe, 2008).

Gendered Perceptions and Integration in the Military

Women were recruited into the post-colonial Kenya military for the first time in 1972, but they belonged to the women's only military unit: the Women Service Corps (WSC). It is only after the December 1999 declaration that disbanded WSC, that women were co-opted into the main arms of the defence forces. Previously, the unit operated as a single entity, and women were prohibited from a majority of roles and operations such as combat and infantry that require a higher level of physical performance. Women had 'special terms and conditions' which took into account their

‘special needs’. Some of these conditions included unwritten policies that women soldiers were not allowed to marry, become pregnant or have children while in service. They were not even supposed to be seen to be romantically involved with their male colleagues, or even with men outside the military (Daily Nation, 2011c).

Today, the winds of change have blown away the discriminatory rules, giving Kenyan women the latitude to muscle it out with men in the military. Women are subject to the same selection and training procedures and no ranks are exclusively reserved for men. They can now marry, become pregnant (even when single) and carry out soldiery duties alongside their male counterparts in any of the departments in the Kenya Army, Airforce or Navy (Daily Nation, 2013). In addition to the traditional support musterings, all frontline musterings such as ground combat, infantry, tank and commando units have been opened up for women to compete with their male colleagues. Although their number is still small compared with their male counterparts, women are joining the military in increasing numbers. For example, although as late as 2001, there were no women officers in the Kenya Navy, by the end of 2011, the highest-ranking woman officer in the Navy had risen to a Lieutenant Colonel. Kenya Navy had 10 female officers and 115 service women by the close of 2011 (Mathangani, 2011).

The integration of women into the military is part of the Kenya governments’ action plan to implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security (hereafter: UNSCR 1325), which commits member states to an increased participation of women in peacekeeping operations and military structures (including civilian police). Further, military recruitment in Kenya is guided by the one third-gender rule in the Constitution (CoK, 2010), which states that no more than two-thirds of members of public bodies shall be of the same gender. These foundations are grounded on the need to see women as key actors and agents for change in society. However, a gender analysis of the military demonstrates that even with a substantive increase of women into the military structures, they tend to take on masculine roles resulting in an entrenchment, rather than transformation of traditional sexist ideologies (Juma & Makina, 2008; Barno, 2014; Daily Nation, 2011b).

KDF Liberating Somalia

National security is the primary concern of any state, and the use of force and militarism are generally accepted as legitimate ways to protect state sovereignty. It is on this strength that in the last quarter of 2011, Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) assembled along the border with war-torn Somalia, in preparation for assaults on Al-Shabaab militia forces behind several kidnappings of foreigners from beach resorts, dealing a major blow to Kenya's tourism industry (Daily Nation, 2011a). Somalia has had no effective government ever since it plunged into repeated rounds of civil wars beginning in 1991, allowing a flourishing of militia armies, extremist rebels and piracy. One month after the KDF incursion, the Kenya government agreed to re-hat its forces under the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). The Kenyan troops were later formally integrated into AMISOM after the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 2036 (hereafter: UNSCR 2036). Christened *Operation Linda Nchi* (literary translated to Operation Protect the Country/State) the KDF assignment, initially involved pushing the Al-Shabaab rebels far inside Somalia away from the common border. The intention was to create a buffer zone from the hostile rebels. After several field successes the new mission, was to 'mop up' what was left of Al-Shabaab—that is, to end the Islamist insurgency for good.

KDF backed by soldiers from the Somali National Army and local anti-Al Shabaab and pro-government militia groups, quickly overran Somalia's southern axis, which spans the country's lower Juba and Gedo provinces. The capture of the port city of Kismayu, just 180 miles from the Kenya-Somalia border, had all along been viewed as the endgame, at least of the military phase of the mission. The victory over Kismayu was not just a significant win against Islamist political extremism, but a symbolic victory in the battle for the world's most dysfunctional country. The city was Al-Shabaab's central base and the port its economic engine, providing an estimated US \$35 million to US \$50 million a year to the group (Verini, 29/12/2012).

The assault on Kismayu was well choreographed. The operation was coordinated, directed, overseen, supervised and undertaken by a contingent of soldiers comprised of women combatants. News of KDF overrunning

and liberating Kismayu, other towns and villages across southern Somalia were soon transmitted (Verini, 2012). Though initially, Kenyans were overjoyed with the successes achieved at the battlefield, the news that female soldiers were at the frontlines of the operation was received with surprised joy, shock, disbelief and amazement. Lead media stories focused on the surprising, unbelievable and even inappropriate nature of the event (Daily Nation, 2011a; Mathangani, 2011; Muiruri, 2009). How would KDF deploy women soldiers to battle the Al-Shabaab? Many Kenyans would not reconcile the image of the soldier, as a life-taker, with the statuses of women as romantic, affective, peacemakers and life-bearers (mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters). This phenomenon is anomalous (Esuruku, 2011).

Secondly, with no effective government, Somalia is one of the world's most dangerous places to operate. In addition, the lack of a clear front and rear exposes the combatants to hostile fire. The terms 'front' and 'rear' are regularly used in military discourse. The 'front' refers to the field, the area where fighting with the enemy takes place (or, often, practice fighting). The 'rear' is responsible for providing for the needs of the fighters at the front. It thus took a lot of courage to challenge Al-Shabaab militants in a terrain they are well versed in and which is largely unknown to Kenyans.

The public reactions to the KDF 'Somalia operation', raise pertinent questions on the core assumptions about the nature and dominant dissertations of African femininity and mothering at one level, and masculinity, militarism, soldiering and warfare at another level. The military being the most masculine of all state institutions, what are the socio-cultural attitudes about women in the armed forces? Is soldiering incompatible to mothering? Do women's presence in the frontlines challenge the 'heroines' subjectivity and femininity? How do women's soldiering and ability challenge the very nature of the armed forces and militarism? How do women's soldiering, femininity and ability contribute to strategic military objectives? Are women combatants in the military the exception? The role of the armed forces as an employer is also brought to bear to allow the military latitude and controls on female hiring and deployment. Consequently, this study explores the interplay of the contradictory dynamics of gender in the military through the lens of Kenyan women combatants in the war against the Al-Shabaab insurgents.

Theoretical Frameworks

A study of the military and warfare in Africa is basically a study of the radical reproduction of traditional gender relations, concepts and division of labour. Lorber (1994, p. 1) describes “gender as an institution that establishes patterns of expectations for individuals, orders the social processes of everyday life, is built into the major social organizations of society, such as the economy, ideology, the family, and politics, and is also an entity in and of itself.” Scott ([1988] 1999, p. 42) contends that, “gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between sexes,” and “is a primary way of signifying relationships of power.” Changes in the organization of social relationships always correspond to changes in representations of power, but the direction of change is not necessarily one way.

Ridgeway (2011) highlights how gender framing founded on stereotypical gender rules in society, shape behaviour and judgments in ways that create systematic patterns of inequalities. These patterns of inequality influence work norms and job matching. On the one hand, Sewell (1992, p. 7) posits that structures comprise simultaneously of cultural schemas (which are “key conventions, recipes, scenarios, principles of action and habits of speech and gesture”) and resources (which can be human, such as physical strength, knowledge, dexterity, emotional commitment, or nonhuman, such as land and factories). For Sewell (1992, p. 18), structures are “dynamic because they are multiple and intersecting, because schemas are transposable, and because resources are polysemic and accumulate unpredictably.” The military can thus, be understood as a structure whose resources (e.g., division of labour) are the effects of schemas (e.g., femininity and masculinity, soldiering and motherhood), just as the schemas are the effects of resources. This conceptualization understands the gender structure as both stable and undergoing dynamic changes.

There are two dominant and intersecting cultural schemas in women’s enlistment into military combats: the gender schema and the military schema. The gender schema constructs a binary order based on perceived differences between the sexes, and is a primary way of signifying relationships of power. Since the military is culturally defined as masculine, the evaluative bias in favour of men is stronger. Hegemonic gender beliefs,

“help maintain the gender system by modestly, but systematically and repeatedly, biasing men’s and women’s behaviours and evaluations in ways that re-enact and confirm beliefs about men’s greater status and competence” (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004, p. 521).

The military schema is based on the gender schema. Thus, the military schema creates hierarchies of those who do not fit (physically or emotionally) the imperative of warrior masculinity, those who serve in non-combat roles, and those who resist the warrior ethos altogether. The intersection of the binary gender schema and the military schema shapes the construction of militarized identities, the military’s daily practices, social stratification and the link between military service and citizenship.

On the dimension of resources, the military is a male-dominated territory where masculinity is the norm. Women, comprise a small percentage of the army and are easily exempt from certain tasks on grounds of their gender. These structural and organizational differences, together with a patriarchal culture, limits the range of military roles to which women are positioned and constitute a barrier to women’s advancement. However, when women are enlisted into combat roles, this gender integration signifies a shift from a gendered structure to a professional-based structure, which may bring about a change in perceptions of femininity and masculinity.

On the other hand, Bourdieu (1986) postulates that social actors’ chances of succeeding in different fields of action are dependent on the various types of capital (economic, cultural, social and symbolic)—that they hold and acquire throughout their lives. He emphasizes the connections and flows between the different types of capital: stocks held in one type of capital might influence the accumulation of others, and agents are able to convert and exchange types of capital over time and from one field to another. The cluster of the different types of capital at any given moment represents the array of obstacles and possibilities in relation to the social action of social groups to which one belongs or wishes to belong. Accordingly, the kinds of capital that women accumulate, the fields of action accessible to them, and their ability to convert the types of capital they hold are all different from those among men.

The conceptualization of types of capital and their convertibility highlight the fact that each individual arrives at the military with different

clusters of capital. Moreover, the various types of capital are gendered. At the same time, the military as a social field creates an assortment of new types of capital. Masculinity and femininity are themselves crucial categories of capital, thereby constructing the meaning of male and female capital (Huppatz, 2009) and reproducing women's inferiority (Enloe, 2000). This is so because feminine capital is the possession of behavioural skills and personal characteristics that accord with the cultural definition of stereotypical femininity (Huppatz, 2009).

The concept of cultural scripts or cultural schemas stresses the place of social actors in shaping their world. The concept exposes the dynamisms of the ways in which capital is deployed and converted over time; how social agents interpret the cultural script in various social contexts and how actors play with these cultural models, alter them, and replace them (Ortner, 2003). Cultural schemas motivate action and provide templates for socially 'worthy' lives. They are behavioural strategies that offer criteria with which social actors evaluate their current situation and direct their action in the future. As such, they serve as strategies for organizing patterns.

Consequently, gender integration to military service is a key scenario taking on different forms in accordance with the social actor's gender (Sasson-Levy, 2006). Military service determines access to differential social, economic and political resources. The significance of military service in shaping women's life courses is thus tied to other cultural scripts (such as seeking fulfilment in being a wife, a mother, a daughter, and a sister) that are accessible to them and the opportunities that open or close depending on their rank position. The interplay between the various types of capital acquired or altered during military service and the various cultural scripts shape the meanings women give to military service.

Methodology

Data on the military and its activities is highly classified. The representation of female combatants in the military is a sensitive issue. Consequently, this necessitated use of a combination of several ethnographic techniques including non-participant observation, in-depth interviews, informal interactions and content analysis. These approaches place the social agent at the centre, and are attentive to detailed ethnographies that illustrate the complex and contradictory realities of women in the military.

Female Combatants Crossing Gender Boundaries or Challenging Masculinities?

The KDF overrun and liberation of several towns and cities in Somalia offered a more stately and majestic vision of war, as it inspired pride and patriotism, as well as glorified combat. Among the KDF soldiers were scores of women combatants deployed alongside men in the campaign to dislodge the Al-Shabaab militants. The media was awash with images, pictures and articles of female soldiers in martial action, expertly preparing for and participating in combat, drilling proudly in military jungle uniform, carrying weapons, jumping out of warplanes, riding tanks, and executing amphibian navy attacks (Daily Nation, 2011a; Mwaniki, 2012). Particularly, the Daily Nation (2013) reported that women “are driving huge rigs down treacherous roads, frisking the militant group Al Shabaab from dangerous dungeons, handling gun turrets, personnel carriers, and providing cover for other soldiers.” Equally, the media showed pictures of some KDF members in peaceful interactions with appreciative Somalia civilians, celebrating the victory (Karanja, 2014; Mathangani, 2011). Going after and subduing Al-Shabaab militants marked the pinnacle of the soldiers’ careers.

The media reports confirmed the public’ ‘fears’ that KDF female soldiers serve in soldiery units (pilots, tank drivers, anti-aircraft operators, naval commandos, infantry, armour and field artillery) that ‘co-locate’ with combat troops. While serving in these units expand women’s roles and, in particular, women’s exposure to and participation in combat, it further affirms that combat is no longer the exclusive province of men. Consequently, the military’s ability to make use of the ties between military service and masculinity seem compromised. Equally, the operation disapproves the perception among the public that Kenya’s peacetime army spends a lot of time training and not fighting. “We feel we need to show Kenyans that the army is for real and that we don’t spend all our time training and devising strategies,” said Sergeant Mwilita, one of the female combatants in the operation.

In confirming the participation of females against the Al-Shabaab militants, the KDF spokesperson said, “Yes, military women are among Kenya’s gallant soldiers called on duty to defend the nation from the Al-Shabaab. There are women on the frontlines and they are even driving

armoured vehicles.” Armoured vehicles have thick, metal bodies. Different types are used for actual fighting as well as ferrying personnel. They usually have a hull from where a shooter or two operate. They are also mounted with huge guns. The brave KDF women form the core of the Kenya Army, Kenya Air Force and the Kenya Navy ranks. They serve in important roles such as combatants, clerks, communication technicians, pilots, military police, instructors and attorneys. Others serve as drivers, aircrew, engineers, doctors, nurses, logisticians and air traffic controllers. Those who serve in infantry and armour units, form the core of a land-based confrontation. Infantry divisions comprise soldiers on foot, who face some of the most challenging situations in the battlefield. They carry out important roles because they are able to penetrate areas that would otherwise be inaccessible with vehicles (Daily Nation, 2011a).

Kenya being mainly a patriarchal society, many wondered if military standards had been lowered to accommodate women into combat. Patriarchal conceptions of masculinity valorise domination. Patriarchal gender norms afford men power and privilege over women. They also put men and women under pressure to conform to prevailing masculine and feminine ideals. Masculinity and femininity are usually seen not as something which individuals automatically possess, but as something to be achieved by acting in accordance with these ideals.

“How possible is it that women can be combat soldiers? Are women subjected to similar standards, similar treatment, and similar physical requirements as males? We thought women as natural carers are fit for non-combatant tasks such as cooking for and preparing male colleagues for war?” the 40-year-old Ms. Nyaboke, a member of the public wondered aloud. “I have always understood women soldiers to be restricted to prescribed gender roles as nurses, cooks, secretaries and officers in personnel units,” reasoned 60-year-old Mr. Mayayyo, another member of the public. Mrs. Kababbo, another member of the public expressed her misgivings:

“I have known women to form part of the defence force of the African traditional societies. In traditional Africa, they were part and parcel of the ferocious warriors that went to war for their people. However, I have never imagined that they would be involved in the modern warfront, doing the actual fighting with the enemy. So women are also trained how to kill? Why should women be masculinised? I thought

their roles remain in supporting male combatants by keeping the supplies alive! Which principle is that, gender equality or what?"

An awed, 30-year-old Mr. Otwenga commented, "What I can say is that I am clearly amazed at the work of our women soldiers in KDF. They form a group of my heroines."

Some members of the public, however, borrowed from history and seemed to know and understand that women in traditional Africa were successful warriors. They gave the classic example of Kenya's Mau Mau liberation army, which had many women fighters. "My grandmother told me that she was a Mau Mau freedom fighter. She even showed me gunshot scars sustained because of her involvement in the freedom struggle. But I sincerely dread the idea of women fighting at the battlefield," opined 28-year-old Ms. Grace Mwema.

"Women are fragile objects. We should not allow our women to deadly warfronts like Somalia. I guess we have enough men soldiers to do the battle. Women soldiers can work from the military base but not in the war field," fumed Mrs. Otieno Snago, a 50-year-old grandmother.

Nonetheless, in affirming the presence of women in its ranks, the KDF spokesperson said that the highest-ranking woman in the military is a colonel. He explained, "In the military, a colonel is a senior commissioned officer, and usually the highest or second-highest field rank." He added that Kenya's "women in the military are highly disciplined," and confirmed of their being "as good as the men." He allayed fears that women were less suited and qualified for combat:

Mission success in the military is the number one priority. We want the best and most qualified defending our freedoms and way of life. It doesn't matter if they are pretty, ugly, male, female, tall, or short, as long as they are the best physically, mentally, and emotionally to accomplish the mission of defending our nation. KDF must maintain the most lethal and elite military by meeting a mission standard, not a gender standard. It does not matter if you are a man or a woman. And the mission isn't any less demanding because women accomplish it. Female conscripts have a growing range of duties. Many combat units are dependent on the services of female soldiers.

Military training is often a tightly choreographed process aimed at breaking down individuality and building official military conduct and group loyalty. This process of socialisation is intimately gendered, as being a soldier is purposefully linked to being a ‘real man’. Accounts of training within the KDF, show how particular forms of masculinity are cultivated among the troops which seek to instil courage, control of emotions, and willingness to take risks and endure hardships, as well as physical toughness. The ability to suppress fear enables soldiers to engage in combat at great risk to their own safety, while the ability to suppress compassion and empathy enables them to enact violence against others. Shame and humiliation by the use of misogynistic and homophobic slurs, are often used to enforce these masculine norms. Masculine ideals of toughness, dominance and heroism are held in high esteem. In affirming why patriarchal ideology is a useful element in the making of a soldier, the KDF spokesperson said:

Military training plays a special role in the ideological creation of soldiers and the notion of combat plays such a central role in the construction of ‘manhood’. In the armed forces, there is a deliberate cultivation of masculinity. Trainees are not born soldiers they are made into soldiers. Becoming a soldier means learning to control fears and domestic longings that are explicitly labelled feminine. Militarists use the myth of war’s manliness to define soldierly behaviour and reward soldiers. Trainees are goaded into turning on and grinding down whatever in themselves is ‘womanly.’ Combat is not just as an important part of being a soldier, it is also an important part of being a man; therefore “to allow women into the central core of the military–combat–is to invite women to the central core of manliness, male identity and thus claims to masculine privilege.

Why do the Kenya public want to see women in the military practise traditional female roles and positions? To fully understand the motivation for such, the KDF spokesperson clarified; “The military is dependent on traditional gender role definitions for its very functioning. The women in the army, in a way, ‘raise the morale’ of their male colleagues and make the army a home away from home. Thus, as male soldiers leave to fight in combat, female soldiers make it feel as much as possible like a home.” This

aspect is more aptly captured by using a family model as Enloe (1993) explains:

‘Morale’ preoccupies officers, and a good commander is one who can create ‘good morale’ in the ranks. To portray the soldier’s regiment as a ‘family’ which cares for him and to whom he owes loyalty is one solution. But without women, this is a difficult enterprise. If women can be made to play the role of wives, daughters, mothers, and ‘sweethearts’, waving their men off to war...then women can be an invaluable resource to commanders.

The women soldiers maintain degrees of both femininity and perceptions of masculinity. However, despite assuming masculinity, they nevertheless endeavour to maintain what may be regarded as the last vestige of their femininity. They keep a demeanour of well-manicured nails and beautiful facials, as if to say, being a soldier is so masculine that the only way to remain feminine is through physical appearance. Even so, they cannot be too feminine as to disrupt a female soldier identity, which is more masculine than that of a civilian woman.

Technology and Warfare

The changing nature of technology of warfare and the tactics involved for its accomplishment is, perhaps, registered by, a female soldier fixated unto a laptop, with her helmet strapped on tightly, and a semi-automatic rifle leaning against her chair. She ploughs up PowerPoint presentations with series of slides outlining the obstacles facing KDF in Somalia. In one of the slides titled, “Demography,” she points out that, in Somalia, “Loyalty revolves around clan” and “Clan is a unifying and divisive factor.” Under “Challenges in Local Areas,” she lists “non-existent government structures” and “vastness of sector.” The use of modern day warfare technological innovations imply that the military is able to penetrate enemy defences and act with precision, thus, reducing the chances for collateral casualties, injury to non-combatant civilians and damage to property. The ability of the military to create active offensive operations using, for example, mapping survey information and geospatial systems as its ‘weapons’, removes the

warfront from the fields to the realms of science, research, data and intelligence.

KDF Military Women' Profiles

For the proud KDF females, nothing compares to the liberating feeling of working within the military and watching their careers take off alongside those of their male colleagues. A glimpse profile of a few of the gallant military women is manifestation enough of their high qualifications:

Happily married with children, soft-spoken but firm Captain Mbaluka explains that she “is an aircraft technician, whose day-to-day work entails ensuring planes are in good condition. It is great to work here. The discipline and the upward mobility for those who want to study is motivating.”

Lieutenant Wairimu, a single mother, discloses that she “is the only female combatant diver in East and Central Africa. I joined the diving department of Kenya Navy, hitherto an all-men affair, and have risen the ranks from a servicewoman to the current position of lieutenant. I survived the rigorous physical training involved when other trainees ‘dropped-out’ on request when the going got tough.”

Single, dating and hoping to marry, Major Amulyoto divulges that she “is a graduate of veterinary medicine and the first veterinary officer in the military. I am credited with setting up the military’s pioneer canine regiment. There was no precedence in what I was supposed to do. The dogs I found here were just guard dogs but I constructed a way of incorporating them in military work. The dogs are classified as sniffer, tracker, search-and-rescue and guard, and then there are those for infantry patrol. I give clinical services to the dogs and train soldiers how to care for them and give them first aid when they are in the field.”

A mother and submissive wife who finds time for her family, Major Kikech says her “portfolio includes being in charge of administration of technicians and logisticians. I studied helicopter recovery in the field and later took a ground maintenance course. Of all, I really love the Puma maintenance.”

The ‘greasy twins’ as Senior Private Kimathi and Corporal Koskei are fondly identified, confess “of thoroughly loving our job and we aspire to become full engineers someday.” The two naval ship technicians are always

in their blue overalls with spanners and greasy hands, sweating the day out in the ‘furnace’ of navy military ships.

Major Koech confides of “having the honour of being the first female pilot with the Kenya Airforce. I joined the Flying School and graduated in the rank of Second Lieutenant, but have since moved up the ranks. I have flown the bulldog aircraft but I now pilot the Y-12 plane, a China-made aircraft.”

Captain Mutisya discloses that, “with a Bachelor of Science in Survey Engineering, I joined the mapping department of KDF. I work in the Engineering Army Corps as a Survey Engineer. My job entails preparing maps and other Geographical Information Systems (GIS), which the military use for briefings, operations and training.” Sensitive to every minute detail, she acknowledges her slow but sure way of doing things: “You make a small mistake and you disorganise everyone.” She has seen it all on the frontlines, “Oh, the land mines and what they cause to innocent people is horrendous.” According to her, the professionalism of Kenya’s armed forces is rated very highly and she feels satisfied to be part of all this, “We hold our heads high when we are on assignment. I am ready to defend this country anytime.” She would want to see the mapping department respond fully to modern military needs.

An auditor with the Kenya Army, Major Makau exhibits a motherly demeanour. She reveals that, “with more than 20 years of service, I am one of the most experienced female officers. I joined the military as an education instructor, after a two-year stint as a teacher. My job profile entails monitoring how various units utilise resources and make reports. I also visit various military bases to audit their accounts.”

From their profiles, it is apparent that each of the women in KDF service sacrifice social and gender responsibilities to be able to discharge their soldiery tasks. Their young and beautiful faces, military fatigues, hair dos and facial expressions reveal very little about the ‘fire beneath their profession.’ Being women and at the military, keeps them away from their boyfriends, husbands, children and families for lengthy periods. Despite these enormous challenges, the women seem acutely aware and prepared for their military roles, and are pragmatic about the nature of their job. The reality is that without exception, they understand that not only are they

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required to carry that soldiery burden, but that the military has every right to expect it of them. They understand the dangers involved.

When asked why she was here in the bush instead of the comfort of her home, Sergeant Mwilitsa, a mother of one, retorted:

I always wanted to join the army. I swore to protect my country and I knew that one day, one time, I would have the opportunity to do what I love and have been trained in military college. When you are handed your gun and your ammunition, that means you are prepared. When I joined the military back then, it was hard to imagine this would come to pass but it has and we have to do our job.

The young and beautiful Corporal Ali confided to “my daily assignment requires I operate behind sandbags, observation posts and man roadblocks, in addition to carrying heavy rifles wherever I go. I left my husband and three-year-old son for the warfront where I lug around a nine-kilogramme rifle. I however love the huge long-range guns I operate. I feel different because this is the stuff I am trained to carry but not the theoretical training.”

However, not all the women get to go to the warfront—some remain at the army base for one reason or another function.

It is clear from the foregoing that, not only must the numerical domination of males in the military be challenged, but also the patriarchal ideological control. As women’s participation in the military increases, gender stereotyping will decrease. Captain Mutisya, the military survey engineer notes:

If women are to be found bearing arms alongside men, the easy distinction of active warrior men and passive women disappears. A basic distinction between armed men and polite women will no longer be applied. The attribution of effeminacy to all male non-combatants will disappear to apparent logical conclusiveness. Military units will become more representative, and correspondingly, less patriarchal.

Major Koech, the Airforce pilot suggests that:

As long as the military is viewed as the domain of men, women will be outsiders and their participation challenged. Thus, a cycle of male

dominance is perpetuated... This cycle can only be broken if we challenge cultural constructions of sex/gender. Secondly, we should challenge institutional arrangements which allow the perpetuation of distinctions on the basis of sex and gender category. That is, reduce the importance of being feminine or masculine and female or male.

Lastly, breaking the masculine/feminine gender paradigms will not be accomplished by simply having more women serve the military, but also have women move into all combat positions and do so in equal proportions to men. This will ultimately, have great gender equity and equality consequences for both the military and Kenyan society as a whole.

Conclusion

The study comes to a similar conclusion as Cilliers et al. (1997) that despite formal policy provisions stipulating that women have an open career path in the military, there still appears popular resistance to women serving in combat roles in Kenya. This reservation often rests on the perceived unsuitability of women for 'masculine roles.' Such perceptions are revealed by questions such as: War involves the risk of death and are women not more vulnerable to attacks? What will happen to women soldiers if they are captured by the enemy? Women have to deal with certain physical and biological realities and does this not hinder their performance in combats?

Based on extreme sexual division of labour, women in the military are expected to (re)enact stereotypically feminine behaviours such as expressing feminine emotions such as nurture, support, empathy and care, while at the same time suppressing these emotions as they face the enemy in combat. They are at one time expected to exhibit masculinity traits such as bravery, aggression and anger, even as they suppress (or even repress) feminine emotions like concern, fear and pain. Thus, the feminized gender roles expectations for women are in direct conflict with the masculine-warrior culture of the military. Women are call to combine their femininity with the combative masculine stance of the warrior in the military. This puts them slightly apart as colleagues in the military, as it conflicts with their person, identity and personality.

Also, as underscored by Juma and Makina (2008) most African countries, Kenya included, are yet to prepare for the integration of women

into their militaries. They do not have operational equipments that are 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 policy, budget and 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 data, science, research, strategy and technology, the 'front' and 'rear' have receded significantly with less dependency on physical force and presence in the battlefields. Women military personnel do not therefore have to take part in direct combat. Those with the most appropriate knowledge and technical competence can still be part and parcel of this new system of warfare. African governments do not have to continually rely on the physical forms of defence and low technology, which relegate women to subordinating men. In conclusion, while military service is a central mechanism for the reproduction of gender relations, for women soldiers it also creates potentiating spaces for transformation and social change.

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