



NOT ENOUGH TO ADD WOMEN AND STIR

Simply recruiting women into the police and military forces in the Democratic Republic of Congo will not curb abuses by security sector personnel, writes NAI researcher Maria Eriksson Baaz. She calls for a comprehensive approach that gets to the root of the problem rather than the “quick fixes” favored by many external actors.

MUCH OF THE VIOLENCE against civilians in the protracted conflict in the DR Congo is perpetrated by state security agents, both the military and the police. It comes in many different forms, such as executions, forced labour, rape and torture. Civilians are also commonly subjected to illegal detention, pillage and illegal taxation. All these forms of abuse must be understood in the light of deep-seated structural dysfunctions in the security forces.

Failed integration processes, with unclear and parallel chains of command, combined with a generous politics of integration that encourages illegal economic activities make a poor foundation for creating security institutions that protect the population. A weak justice sector, hostile civil-military relations and widespread discontent among ordinary soldiers and police officers, disgruntled by embezzlement among superiors, poor salaries and low status, further add to the problem.

A MULTITUDE OF international actors have responded with various initiatives to foster professionalism and end the cycles of violence, particularly sexual violence. These efforts have often taken the form of various training programmes for police and military aimed at teaching security sector staff about human rights and how to behave as disciplined protectors of the civil population, particularly women.

Recently, some external actors have called for the inclusion of more women in the police and military of the DR Congo as a way to curtail the many abuses against civilians. These propositions are part

of a global trend in favor of more women in the security sector, particularly in peace-keeping operations. The inclusion of women is often portrayed as a key to improving civil-military relations and to decreasing violence against civilians, especially sexual abuse.

WHILE THESE ASSUMPTIONS can be questioned in other settings, they are particularly problematic in the complex security context of the DR Congo. Interviews conducted with both civilians and security sector personnel for a NAI research project clearly reveal the limitations of these propositions. Most civilians – men and women – claimed they fear women in uniform more than men, describing the former as more brutal and merciless.

Moreover, women police and military staff described themselves as no different from their male colleagues in terms of their propensity for violence. In fact, women police and military staff were the ones who emphasized the importance of courage and toughness most. They also often described themselves as tougher than the men.

This image of women in security sector institutions does not of course mean that women police officers are necessarily more violent than their male colleagues. The perceptions must be understood in relation to constructions of policing and militarism as a male sphere. Consequently, there is an assumption that there must be something

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PHOTO: MARIA ERIKSSON BAAZ



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Congolese police officers marching during a parade to mark the 50th anniversary of independence in Kinshasa, capital of the DR Congo, 30 June, 2010.

fundamentally wrong with the women joining the forces. They are assumed to be exceptionally violent, on a mission to avenge misdeeds or are simply described as prostitutes looking for clients.

Irrespective of whether women are more or less violent

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than their male colleagues, or are equally so, the research demonstrates the limitations of the proposed solution to combat violence by simply adding more women. The problem of violence against civilians is not that there are too many men in the security sector. While violence against civilians can to some extent be attributed to ideals of militarized masculinity celebrated in security institutions in

the DR Congo (as in most other similar contexts globally), this does not mean that women entering these spaces do not embrace these ideals in the same way the men do.

WHILE WOMEN SHOULD have equal access to state security forces, simply adding more women to already dysfunctional security institutions will surely not lead to desirable change. Moreover, arguing for women's inclusion on the grounds that it will automatically solve human rights abuses also risks placing an impossible responsibility on female security sector staff. They are sent out on a mission impossible identified by others, pigeonholed by fictional assumptions about gender and violence that they themselves do not share.

Only a comprehensive approach, addressing the root causes of the problems, has the potential to reduce human rights abuses by security sector staff. While gender undoubtedly is important here, interventions based on simplistic and essentialist notions of gender risk doing more harm than good. ■