

SOMALIA: Meet the tank girls taking on al-Shabab

Somalia's fight against jihad will be decisive for women's rights – and may be decided by female soldiers.

By Christina Goldbaum

Foreign Policy (28.10.2016) – <http://atfp.co/2f1b9NR> – It was 9:30 a.m., in a desolate corner of Somalia, and Lt. Cpl. Juliet Uwimana was taking her tank for a test drive. She and the rest of Uganda's Battle Group 18 had been in the war-torn Lower Shabelle region for only a week, but already the battle group was on high alert.

Al-Shabab militants had overrun three similar forward-operating bases in the last year, killing more than 100 soldiers. They had also attacked dozens of other bases, including one just six miles from their post in Arabiska. But this morning was a quiet one – hence Uwimana's test drive in the T-55 tank. She stood on a metal seat as the machine jerked forward, spewing smoke from its massive treads and rolling through sand so deep it threatened to swallow the vehicle whole.

Uwimana is one of roughly 500 women in the Ugandan contingent of AMISOM, the 17,000-strong African Union force tasked with battling al-Shabab and securing the troubled Horn of Africa nation so that a political process can take root. They serve as drivers, gunners, and technicians in the motorized infantry

division – roles that women were barred from in the U.S. military until as recently as last year. But in Somalia, female peacekeepers have been serving in these positions for years.

This is remarkable not only because al-Shabab is among the region's most dangerous terror groups, but because Somalia is generally one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a woman, according to various rankings and polls. Somalia has the highest prevalence of female genital mutilation in the world at 95 percent, among the highest maternal mortality rates at 1,600 deaths per 100,000 live births, and, though official statistics are unreliable, anecdotal evidence suggests that sexual assault remains an inescapable threat for most women across the country.

But the fact that AMISOM features so many women in combat roles is neither a matter of oversight, nor desperation. It's a strategic gambit. The female peacekeepers have an unspoken but very clear mandate: to prevent their male colleagues from perpetrating sexual violence against civilians and to help nurture faint stirrings of gender equality in Somalia.

After a bumpy swing around the base's green Hesco barriers, Uwimana's tank gunner, Lt. Cpl. Lehi Chebet, calls down for the tank's driver to cut the engine, her voice nearly drowned out by its roar. The vehicle lurches to a halt and the fresh-faced tank gunner nimbly maneuvers her way out of its small opening, giving a short nod. The machine is ready.

or nearly three decades, Somalia has been the world's default

example of a failed state. After the collapse of dictator Siad Barre's regime in 1991, the country fell under the sway of a patchwork of local warlords whose bloody inter-clan fighting destroyed infrastructure and crops and produced one of the worst famines the world has ever seen. Out of this chaos came the terrorist group al-Shabab, which pledged allegiance to al Qaeda and seized control of large swaths of the country, including parts of the capital, Mogadishu.

AMISOM first deployed to Somalia in 2007 under an African Union Peace and Security Council mandate to protect Somali infrastructure and government officials as well as to deliver humanitarian aid. Since then, the mission's size, mandate, and geographical presence have dramatically increased. AMISOM's mission is now more counterinsurgency than peacekeeping. Its troops have pushed al-Shabab militants out of most urban areas and into sparsely populated regions like Lower Shabelle, where the two forces are engaged in a deadly game of cat and mouse.

But as AMISOM's presence has grown, so too has the controversy surrounding it. A 2014 Human Rights Watch report documented widespread sexual exploitation and assault of women and girls by Ugandan and Burundian troops within AMISOM. Since the report was released, AMISOM has created mechanisms for survivors of sexual violence to report accusations against soldiers. But it has also worked to keep new allegations of sexual assault from becoming public. According to U.N. and nongovernmental organization sources working on gender-based violence in Somalia, a 2013 internal U.N. report that alleged sexual assault by AMISOM soldiers was buried after researchers involved in writing it received death threats.

Deploying female peacekeepers has been a part of the U.N.'s

official strategy to fight sexual violence since 2000, when the Security Council passed Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security. The logic behind that resolution, which called for greater female participation in peacekeeping missions as well as new safeguards to prevent gender-based violence, was simple: Women are generally more comfortable speaking with female authorities, so deploying female blue helmets should make it easier for women to report cases of sexual violence and enhance the ability of missions like AMISOM to investigate such cases. The presence of female soldiers within peacekeeping battalions is also thought to make sexual violence against civilians less likely.

But beyond the U.N.'s impressive claim, made in a study of Resolution 1325's implementation last year, that "not a single female peacekeeper has ever been accused of sexual exploitation and abuse on mission," there is little more than anecdotal evidence to support the idea that female peacekeepers are an effective antidote to sexual violence.

"There is this idea that women are a civilizing influence, that maybe some men would be ashamed in front of their female colleagues to be engaged in that kind of behavior," said Mary Schwoebel, a professor of conflict resolution studies at Nova Southeastern University in Florida who has trained Ugandan peacekeepers in Somalia. "But unless women are commanders and have the power to do something about it, I'm not sure that makes any difference."

Sixteen years after the resolution was approved, women still account for only 3 to 4 percent of all U.N. peacekeepers. According to Pablo Castillo-Diaz, a peace and security analyst at U.N. Women, a United Nations agency dedicated to gender

equality, “many of them are in support roles, such as clerical support jobs, even if they have been trained to be much more in contact with the population or in protection tasks.”

The proportion of women in AMISOM’s Ugandan contingent is only slightly higher than the U.N. average of 6.6 percent. And Uganda consistently ranks near the bottom of the U.N. Development Program’s Gender Inequality Index. But with more than 30 percent of those women serving in combat positions, the likelihood that they will eventually attain leadership positions is much higher. Many of these women not only aspire to be commanders, they view themselves as pioneers in a new generation of female fighters on the front line.

Ugandan Pvt. Scovia Nagun Mafabo, who drives a tank-like infantry combat vehicle known as a BMP, said there were no female BMP drivers when she arrived at the Kampala Armoured Warfare Training School in 2012. “But when I arrived, they said let us see if these girls can also manage and they selected four of us to train with the men,” she said. “After we successfully finished the course and qualified to be drivers, the school said, ‘From today we are going to be training more girls.’ Now we have trained six more girls in BMP.”

Still, the number of Ugandan women training and serving in combat roles has begun to grow only recently, meaning that it will be a decade or more until they ascend the ranks to positions of power. And even when there are more female officers, many fear it won’t do much to change the hyper-masculine culture that prevails in most militaries that contribute peacekeeping troops.

"[Military] culture is not being changed by women; it's changing women," Schwoebel said. "The culture is a really macho, sexist culture, and it's not going to change easily. So to succeed as a woman and get promoted to higher echelons, you have to adopt a character or traits that are also macho."

This might be true in places like Arabiska, the remote forward operating base where Uwimana and Chebet work beside only a few female colleagues. But in Uganda's main AMISOM base in the Somali capital of Mogadishu, where the largest group of female soldiers is stationed, women have carved out a space where femininity becomes its own form of camaraderie.

"You see this is our place; here we can just relax," Cpl. Maimuna Kahindo, who drives a non-armored vehicle transporting equipment and personnel, said recently as she and seven other female soldiers kicked back in a women-only dormitory on AMISOM's massive razor-wired complex at the airport in Mogadishu. Kahindo, who is stocky with a wide, infectious smile, plopped down on a bed made up with green-and-pink plaid sheets in their shipping-container-turned-barracks. She and the other soldiers were debating the merits of a jar of hair cream with a picture of a woman suggestively tilting her head on the label. The consensus was that nothing – not even the contents of the jar – could help their hair in Somalia's oppressive heat.

Eventually tiring of the conversation, Kahindo turned on the large stereo next to her bed and a popular Nigerian pop song filled the room. She stood and started swaying to the beat, elbows hugging her hips, as the women on the bed cheered her

on. One chorus in, Oliver Basalirwa, another driver, joined Kahindo and began crooning along to the song.

Kahindo laughed. "You see," she said, still rocking her hips to the music. "Here we are just at peace. Mogadishu, it is not too bad, yeah?"

Driving through the Somali capital, it's easy to forget that just a few years ago these streets were the front lines of the war against al-Shabab. These days, humid air from the Indian Ocean wafts over the shiny blue windows of brand-new office buildings and young girls jump around poorly painted but brightly colored playgrounds. The restaurant at the Beach View Hotel, a faded yellow building sandwiched between a wall of Hesco barriers and a white sand waterfront, is packed once again, only four months after an al-Shabab attack there killed at least 20 people.

Mogadishu's peace is tenuous. In July, two suicide bombers tried to breach the AMISOM base where Kahindo and Basalirwa are stationed, killing 14 people. But for a country that has been at war for a quarter century, the change in the city feels dramatic. It just hosted its second annual international book fair, drawing hundreds of visitors and showcasing more than a dozen local and international authors. Residents can now stroll down the street and grab a slice of brick-oven pizza or watch a 3-D movie at the Pizza House Cinema.

Although most of the country outside the capital remains dangerous, the relative calm in Mogadishu has allowed a national discussion about gender roles and women's rights that

was impossible during the height of the war. The Parliament has drafted and debated – though not passed – a bill that would criminalize sexual violence for the first time, and the National Leadership Forum, which is overseeing preparations for the country's upcoming general election, has endorsed a 30 percent quota for women in Parliament.

Peacetime has many obvious benefits for Somali women; among the hardships of wartime, they were disproportionately affected by sexual violence and inadequate access to health care. But there are some who worry that the end of war could mean a step backward for women. Women routinely became heads of households out of necessity during the war, and many started businesses in order to survive.

“You can always say conflict is an opportunity for gender roles to change,” said Tanya Chopra, a contractor with U.N. Women in Somalia. “In some areas women of Somalia have been more economically engaged because their husbands are fighting or have died, and women are wondering now if ... they will have to go back to being in the house and have to give up their economic engagement.”

Some, including Chopra, are looking to the female soldiers in AMISOM to inspire Somali women to fight to retain their wartime freedoms. They also hope that the presence of female AMISOM officers in the street, in U.N. conference rooms, and in meetings with top Somali officials will change men's perceptions about gender roles.

“When we say we have a leader who's coming to meet you, [local

leaders] expect to see a male and they are surprised when they see a female. Maybe because of the culture they thought as a female you can't be a leader," said Ugandan Capt. Mercy Ruhinda. "But I think that is starting to change, at least they see that women can be in leadership positions, and we are trying to help address the problems here."

But where many see the presence of female AMISOM soldiers having the greatest impact is in changing the mindset of young Somali girls. According to Schwoebel, "It could have a great impact on young women in Somalia because seeing women, especially from African countries, in these positions, they become like role models to these young girls."

Evidence from previous missions suggests that the example set by female peacekeepers can make a difference. In Liberia, for example, an all-female Formed Police Unit from India was credited by the U.N. with inspiring Liberian women to join the country's police force, increasing the percentage of female officers from 13 to 21 in the five years after the Indian unit deployed in 2007. In Somalia, a similar trend is emerging, perhaps inspired by the women of AMISOM and perhaps by a 24-year-old member of the diaspora, Iman Elman, who as a captain is the highest-ranking woman of the Somali National Army (SNA). Elman was raised in Canada following the slaying of her father, the prominent human rights activist Elman Ali Ahmed, but returned to Mogadishu in 2009 to work at her mother's center for victims of sexual assault, the Elman Peace and Human Rights Center.

"A lot of girls I talked to believed that they were physically incapable of doing what men could do," Elman said. "I remember Googling woman bodybuilders and showing them the pictures

because I wanted them to see that that wasn't true."

Elman soon realized the only way to convince young women of their potential would be to demonstrate it herself – by joining the military. When she enlisted in the SNA at the age of 19, she was one of only two women in her battalion of 350 soldiers. After a year of struggling through intense verbal abuse from her male colleagues, Elman went on to serve on the front lines of the war against al-Shabab, earning national recognition for her accomplishments. Though the number of women in uniform is still very low, she says, more young women are expressing interest in joining Somalia's nascent military force.

"There's been an influx of girls, young girls, joining the army, and the boys are a bit more accepting of it than when I joined," she said.

But the SNA is still a long way from being considered a professional fighting force. It's estimated that 16,000 troops are poorly trained and equipped, and they often go months without pay. That poses a host of challenges for female troops like Elman that the women of AMISOM don't have to contend with. The Somali army doesn't have proper barracks, let alone reporting mechanisms or disciplinary procedures for gender-based discrimination and abuse.

"We still don't have a gender department, we don't have a human rights department," Elman said. "When I joined there wasn't a single channel where I could lodge any complaints about how the guys were treating me."

Somali female soldiers haven't yet earned the same respect as their AMISOM counterparts, and young SNA recruits still complain about sexual harassment and mistreatment by their male colleagues, Elman said. But as AMISOM prepares to withdraw from Somalia and hand combat operations over to the SNA, perhaps as early as 2018, the role of female soldiers in both forces has never been more important. Gender norms are changing as Somalia inches toward peace, and women in uniform will play an important role in safeguarding what little progress was made toward gender equality during wartime – and leading the charge for full equality during peacetime.

For now, peace and equality seem a long way off. Though some stability has returned to Mogadishu, bombings and targeted assassinations are still commonplace. Outside the capital, al-Shabab still terrorizes huge swaths of the country and clan militias do as they please in the absence of government control. The outlook for women in these areas is grim; one out of every 12 women dies of pregnancy related-causes and nearly half of all Somali girls are married by the age of 18. Whether or not the government can wrest control over these regions will not just be decisive for women. It may be decided by women, since more of them are serving in uniform.

“Women raised this country; they have been mediating peace throughout the war,” said Leila Mohamoud Abdulle, a women's rights activist in Mogadishu. Now women have a chance to fight for peace on the frontlines and help build a culture of respect and gender equality in the armed forces.

“If we want peace to last,” she said, “we are going to need

the leadership from women.”