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COMMENT

Women's voices in the military can no longer be ignored

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DESPITE active attempts to recruit and promote women, they remain a minority in combat and senior posts and the military in general across the globe.

For example, less than 11% of women in Nato member nations' armed forces are on active duty. Few countries have reached a critical mass of 15%, necessary to move beyond the token effect. South Africa is a notable exception, with 25% of women on active duty, and about 15% having served on peacekeeping operations in Africa.

Yet despite this numerical increase, they have not been able to shift gender norms or regender the military. The military remains a highly-gendered organisation in terms of opportunity and occupational structure.

On International Women's Day, March 8, we need to ask the question: Why is this the case?

There are numerous physical, social and institutional barriers that affect women's inclusion in the military. Resistance against female soldiers in general and combat roles have been a long standing global phenomenon, even in militaries that allow women to serve in these roles.

The resistance is based on several different arguments, among which the most common is that women do not

live up to the physical demands of the military. Some claim that women are inherently more peaceful than men and thus not suited to serve in the military. Others point to the effect that female soldiers have on male bonding and cohesion and the impact on military effectiveness.

In more recent years, arguments for women's participation in the military have gained prominence, indicating that their inclusion is not only necessary but essential, hence the need to mainstream gender in security sector reform. Associated with this is the demand to increase the number of women in peacekeeping operations, especially those that involve the protection of civilians caught up in armed conflict.

Presently two different lines of reasoning continue to influence debates on women's role and integration in the military. The one emphasises gender neutrality and women's rights, where women's equality and right to equal opportunities are underlined.

The other focuses on gender differences, arguing that women can contribute something unique to the military because of their gender, thereby making the military more diverse and operationally effective.

While both strands have generated an impressive amount of literature and debate, critics claim that none of



WOMEN SANDF soldiers march through Durban during a Women Imbokodo Armed Forces Parade. | NQOBILE MBONAMBI African News Agency (ANA)

these strategies can alter the military's masculine culture, which contributes to women's continued subordination in the military.

A lot has to do with the organisational culture of the military, which requires conformity and the acceptance of the existing masculine culture embedded in the warrior ethos. Women who are included as "equals" are forced to accept, integrate, and adopt masculinity norms to be recognised as "proper" soldiers.

Yet at the same time, they are expected to bring "diversity" to the military with their gender, based on gender difference and the value they bring to the organisation.

However, this can reinforce an

essentialist discourse, resulting in a reversal of gender equality, where women are relegated to perform certain duties based on their gender that are considered "less valuable" than combat roles.

To make sure there is greater equivalence between the contribution both men and women make to the military, some have proposed a new strategy that entails regendering the military and working towards a military culture where both "masculine" and "feminine" traits are equally valued to ensure organisational effectiveness.

In the type of operations militaries perform today, traditionally "feminine" qualities such as compassion, empathy and communication have become as important as typical "masculine" attributes, like courage, strength and rationality.

To achieve such a transformation of the military, it is essential to not only emphasise the diversity that women bring with them, but to develop a military culture that embraces all these values.

At the same time, there is a need to increase the number of women in the army so that women's bodies disrupt the dominant, masculine norms. This would bring about a more androgynous military culture, which is more suited to the type of missions that soldiers deploy in today.

The problem is that in most militaries, women's integration rests on expectations that they assimilate the hegemonic masculine military. Due to this, few women in the military are willing to assert their voice and adopt a radical standpoint to infuse alternative values. It is much easier to conform and comply with the existing status quo to mitigate the effects of social isolation and the potential impact on their military careers.

While one does see a definite shift from "tinkering", equal treatment of women, and "tailoring" positive action towards their inclusion based on equivalence to bring about "transformation" of existing systems and structures, this is still a work in progress.

Nonetheless, with gender now embedded within the Security Sector Reform policy frameworks of international and regional organisations, there is evidence that women's voices in the military can no longer be ignored – meaning that gender is now firmly on the agenda as never before.

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