

Female Combatants in West Africa: Progress or Regress?

by Thelma Ekiyor

Introduction

Recent wars in West Africa have introduced a phenomenon that is not popular in the history and mythology of West Africa. The voices of women, stereotypically known to be romantic, affective, and soothing now echo with the masculinity and monstrosity common among warriors of old. Gone are the days when women sang the praises of warrior men. They too are warriors, capable of defending their nations and ideals (whatever that means in contemporary African warfare). Large numbers of women were in active combat in the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia. Some of them rose to the rank of commanders, generals, and senior intelligent officers. They were fierce and feared by all including women and children.

This phenomenon is anomalous. Patriarchy is enshrined and entrenched in West African societies and the military, violence, and wars typify patriarchy. The infiltration of women into this fraternity could be viewed as entering the last frontier that has been the preserve of men in Africa for many years. Victory for the women's movement in Africa! But is this 'victory' by design or by default? Or is this the kind of victory we want to settle down for?

This article will focus on the growing trend of women's enlistment in regular and irregular armies in the West Africa sub region. It will examine factors that necessitated this interest. The core debate in this article will examine whether women's active involvement in combat is progress or a regress in our common struggle as activists for the liberation of the African woman.

It is important to note here that we are not suggesting in this paper that women-in-combat is an entirely new phenomenon in West Africa. A few women warriors can be counted in a number of West African countries. Our interest in the subject is the rate and number of women who have become comrades-in-arm in West Africa since the proliferation of civil wars and the impact of this trend on the militarization of the West African society.

PATRIARCHY

Patriarchy is practiced at its best or perhaps worst in Africa. Male dominance is evident in all echelons of power and spheres of life. Men define cultures and religions. Women are rarely visible in many areas of decision-making. Women's opinions are generally not sought at home, and by extension in communities.

Women have historically been known as nurturers, homemakers, life givers etc. While these roles are important, they are seen as only relevant to the male roles of providers, leaders, and decision makers. In wartime, women's roles are further diminished as men are viewed as protectors and women the protected. Women are not consulted about whether the

community or society should engage in war or not, nor are they thought about as fighters or soldiers.

War symbolizes patriarchy. It has been seen as bringing out that which is strong and manly. Patriarchal societies evolve institutions that provide the moral, legal, and even metaphysical justification and freedom for men to express what they claim as their distinct and unique attribute—violence. The military is the modern form of such institutions. It is, therefore, natural and beyond dispute—in the view of men and their patriarchal societies—that the army attracts and should belong to men only.

In their defense against this allegation, men may argue that women have never been left out of institutions of violence. In traditional warfare they accompanied men on battlefields to sing, bury the dead, transport goods, and even advise the warriors when in bed. These traditional roles have no doubt been transported into modern armies as women are once again seen as occupying supportive positions of nurses, secretaries, and cooks. The prevailing perception in a patriarchal society is that men make the best soldiers and combatants and women should take it or leave it.

Not only are women expected to conform to the male-dominated structures in Africa, they must teach their children to accept that it's a man's world. So, to the extent that women are the primary teachers of children and therefore builders of society, they actively partake in perpetuating a world that makes them second-class citizens, whether willingly or by coercion. This, we believe, is fundamental to the struggle. Women have a symbiotic relationship with men. Women's compliance and cooperation with male status, their culture, worldview, and values is key to whether *patriarchy* will live or die in the 21st Century.

Militarization of Africa

The wave of pro independence and revolutionary movements in the 1950s & 60s led to self rule in many African countries. But this did not come easily. Africans had to fight bloody battles with their colonizers to gain independence. So the new post-colonial Africa was birthed through the valor and courage of the Mai Mai, Zanu-PF, and other violent movements that proliferated on the continent. Africa continued in this military culture after independence. Regimes were toppled and replaced with the military. The argument was that the army was the most organized and mature institution in Africa's fledgling states. As a result the military assumed total control of the political space in most African countries. Post-colonial Africa therefore was born and raised militaristically. Militarism according to Sara Hlupekile Longwe, is defined as "a process whereby military values, ideology and patterns of behavior achieve a dominating influence on the political, social, economic and external affairs of the state; and as a consequence the structural, ideological and behavioral patterns of both the society and the government are militarized."

Not only did the military seize the political space, it is exacting an overwhelming influence on the social-cultural orientation of most (if not all) African societies. For instance, celebrations

of independence days in most African countries are events marked by the display of military hardware and 'genius'. Students parade the streets in the drill of an army. The best weapons of the countries are displayed and soldiers demonstrate their military capability. In essence, African states pride themselves in their military capabilities instead of their economic and political vibrancy.

Berewa Jommo in a paper delivered at the annual conference of the Women in Peacebuilding Network of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding contends that the pervasive influence of the military has also seeped into domestic relationships "...with male heads (as in 'Generals') of families; with children as 'troops' who must obey unquestioningly orders from 'above', who must be 'seen and not heard'. Their mothers, who can be changed, multiplied or disposed of according to the whim of the 'General', being the 'sergeants' through whom orders are issued."²

The cold war and post cold war eras also saw African states increase the stocks in their arsenals. Lucrative arms dealership and the trade moved from heavy weaponry to light and small arms. The two players of the Cold War provided weapons to their devoted allies. Aside from the sale and transport of arms in Africa, foreign governments located military bases in Africa, using them as theatre for the testing of dangerous weapons and zones for surveillance.

As the Cold War ended and the world looked to the dawn of a dispensation of peace, Africa simply changed the face of violence. Guerrilla warfare replaced military coup d'tat. This new phenomenon has accelerated the acculturation of the African society in the culture of violence. More than ever before the power of the gun is known to everyone including women and children. With the power of AK-47s and M-16s boys and sometimes girls can gain status, control of food, mineral resources and the state. Entire societies are subjected to servitude at the whims of the 'gunlords'. The culture of violence seems to prevail in every village, town, and city of West Africa.

Where are Women in the Militarization Process?

With the culture of violence pervading most West African societies, women are increasingly abandoning the aprons for the gun. They are finding their place on the battle field. Women in West Africa are sick and tired of being the vulnerable, the sexually assaulted, the injured, tortured, and refugees. More and more women want the power that the gun gives in order to defend themselves and their families. Official records from the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone show that at least 1,000 girls participated in direct combat. A colleague from Northern Uganda indicated to us that women were seen on battlefields fiercely engaging the Ugandan army with their babies tied to their backs. Indeed this evolving trend is a direct affront to the acceptable norms of patriarchy.

In this section, the article examines the trend and the debate it has generated in West African societies including amongst women themselves. Here, the focus is on regular and irregular military structures in West Africa.

Women in national armies: When asked if women should be part of the military, a female peacebuilding practitioner during a recent workshop in Liberia, said, “no, never, it is impossible, women cannot join the army to fight, if they join they should be nurses or cooks”. This is the type of comment that would make women’s rights activists irate. The women’s movement in Africa is growing and the message preached states in no uncertain terms that women and men are equals and women can be anything men can be. Everyone is taught or socialized into gender roles; therefore African women need to break out of societal moulds. But the old system of patriarchy has succeeded to convince most women that they cannot break out of the parameters set by the system. They can be lawyers, doctors, linguists, home economists, etc. but never soldiers. Soldiers are trained to kill, and the “giver of life and nurturer”, which usually describes the woman, cannot also be the taker of life.

The debate against women’s enlistment in the military is reinforced by the structure of military institutions in West Africa. National armies are not designed to attract women. From the oversized uniforms to the barracks or mess halls, it is clear that West African national armies did not consider women during the conceptualizing stage. Male soldiers, on the other hand, are not receptive to the idea of female colleagues. They have used gender as a boundary to prevent women from active combat. Male soldiers have stated that knowing that their spouses and girlfriends are waiting for them at home helps to keep them alive. They believe having women in the army prevents men from functioning as effectively as they would when women are absent.

The prevailing argument that society (men and women) give for women’s exclusion from the military is that biologically women cannot withstand the grueling training and practice of combat. Women are too soft hearted to kill and women would not be able to lift/carry injured comrades in cases of rescue. The women who succeeded to enlist in combat and come out successfully are tagged as those who have difficulties finding husbands, lesbians or just plain ugly. This implies that only dysfunctional women would voluntarily enlist for combat.

In spite of the growing voice of women activists in favour of women’s involvement in the army, the debate for a differentiated male and female’s roles—ascribing militarism to masculinity—remains strong among most women in West Africa. But are West African women joining the military? The answer is yes. Although the number may be less compared with other regions especially in Europe and America it is better than ten years ago. It is true that men are the prime instigators of war, but West African history challenges the suggestion that *only* men defend their nations. History records women who fought for their clans, kingdoms and countries. A good example is Queen Amina of Zazzua (later known as Zaire), who soon after becoming Queen fought to protect her kingdom from colonial rule. The roles of such women are hardly remembered, and if remembered, are not equated with modern day African woman.

Compared with African women, women in Western societies have made major advances in the struggle for female inclusion in the military. Women in the United States and Europe express the desire to enlist in the military, to be able to fight for their country in wars they feel are “morally right”. They were given the opportunity to prove themselves during the Gulf War in 1990, and more recently in the so-called “war against terrorism”.

Perhaps one similarity shared between women in the military in Western countries and Africa is that in both instances, women are on the receiving end of discrimination. Women rarely rise to senior ranks and there are reports that high-ranking male officers have conjugal relations with junior female officers. In the United States there was a landmark ruling that there cannot be consensual sex between senior and junior officers in the military because of power imbalance and the strict military code of respect for a superior officer. Such thinking is not evident in West African armies and this suggests that there might not be any recourse to women who find themselves in such situations. Because West African societies are patriarchal, the available recourse of a military tribunal headed by men might act to discourage women who want to seek redress there.

In Western societies, the debate for women’s inclusion in the military is in the public domain. In West Africa it is still unpopular to openly discuss the issue. Women will need to collectively speak out on the issue. However, the most needed collective voice is divided as many women activists are still not convinced that the way out of the targeted violence against women is for women to infiltrate and if possible transform the institution that perpetrates such evil against them.

Enlistment in Irregular Armies (Rebel groups & Private armies): Women may be conspicuously less in regular armies in West Africa; their number is increasing in illegal armies, rebel or revolutionary movements. Private armies and rebel movements have discovered the unique roles women and only women can assume on battle fields. At one time in the Liberian civil war majority of Charles Taylor’s bodyguards were women. Taylor publicly indicated that women could be easily trusted then men. Women can easily devote their lives to a cause once they are convinced that it is noble and in the defence of life and human dignity. Rebel movements through propaganda have convinced some women to believe in their movements; hence, women pledged their total loyalty. Yoweri Museveni in Uganda, Africa National Congress of South Africa, Zanu-PF of Zimbabwe, Charles Taylor of Liberia, Kone of the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda and Foday Sankoh of Sierra Leone can all attest to the roles and contributions of women in their various struggles.

It should be pointed out that the recruitment of women in rebel movements does not have a dignifying history. While a few women may have volunteered to join these rebel movements, majority were conscripted violently. Conscription of women was higher in cases where rebel movements needed to replace their men lost in battle. There is also force by necessity. In situations of crisis where it seems like only those who are armed survive, women, particularly young girls, join rebel movements to survive. This was well illustrated in Sierra Leone where

young girls who joined the RUF (Revolutionary United Front) claimed they felt they had no other choice. Only the RUF could assure them of staying alive. Others report that they were kidnapped and made to stay in RUF camps. With the war in Sierra Leone officially over, personal accounts of ex RUF female combatants show that most of them did not understand what the war was about or more specifically what the RUF's goals and objectives were.

Violence against women in Irregular Armies

Women who volunteered to join irregular rebel movements and groups may have thought that by joining these groups they would preserve their lives and dignity and provide for the well being of their families. The assumption would be that since women have destroyed the myth by becoming combatants, they would now be treated equally as men. Sadly, the opposite happened. Patriarchal hierarchies are harshly reinforced in rebel movements and groups. Since many of these groups are not governed by the same strict code of ethics found in national armies, abuse and victimization is far worse.

Violence is used as a tool to keep women in their place. Women are exposed to more brutal forms of violence in these armies and are often ridiculed. They are told that if *they want to fight like men, they should be able to endure pain like men*. The Sierra Leone conflict revealed that female combatants suffer different forms of violence at the hands of their comrades. Women are still raped, beaten, and victimized even when they join rebel movements. In an article written by Asma Abdel Halim entitled, *Attack with a friendly weapon*, Halim highlights a situation that is commonplace in wars in Africa: *“Gender relations in the Southern Sudanese army were based on the subordination of women, and the same relationship survives in a different climate of war. A change of the role of the man from breadwinner to combatant entitles him to more rights. The change of the role of the woman from a housewife and mother to a combatant causes a further decline in her status.”* Forced marriages and rape seem to be common amongst combatants. Women are reminded that whatever additional roles and status they may have attained in the movement does not relieve them of their “traditional” role as providers of sex.

To survive this further humiliation, women combatants form alliances with male combatants and these alliances often result in the provision of sexual favors. Sometimes women have to adopt some characters of masculinity. They have to act like men “tomboyish” to fit in. Female combatants, e.g. in Sierra Leone were as vicious as men in torturing and abusing other women, all in the name of fitting in.

So is this Progress?

Should we claim that women's increased enlistment in various military groups has heralded progress? Or is it a step backward? In *Development in conflict: the gender dimension* Judy El Bushra and Eugenia Piza Lopez state that, “Armed conflict can be pictured as a fault-line running across the evolution of a society, expressing injustice and grievances and often indicating where transformation is most needed”. This statement holds some truth. Conflict

and wars throughout the world have led to some radical changes in the status quo of society. To that extent women have benefited from some of the war induced evolutions in most societies. There are examples around the world of how wars and violent conflicts have played important roles in the women's movement by raising the profile of women. For example, it is believed that World War II and the Vietnam War helped the women's movement in the United States to gain admittance into many sectors that were closed to them prior to each war.

Can this be said in West Africa? Have the tragic wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia elevated the status of women? Yes. To some appreciable extent bloody civil wars in West Africa exposed long-held stereotypes against women. Although women are still perceived as victims, supporters, nurtures, etc. they have also revealed that they are violent, 'tomboyish', and takers of life as well. Perhaps this has altered the way West Africa views its women. Women can be and do anything. They can rise to the occasion and use violent force (a male attribute) either to survive or for the pleasure of it.

At the political level an unprecedented number of women's groups and organizations have come to the fore. They are active, vocal, and followed. Their leadership abilities have simply confounded their male counterparts and threatened their fragile egos. In Sierra Leone women's participation in the parliament has risen from 0.4% to 14%. One of the interim leaders of Liberia was a woman; a woman also heads the largest opposition party. Women are also active in human rights, peacebuilding, humanitarian and development organizations. These women have given leadership a new face in the organizations they lead. In pre-war Liberia and Sierra Leone, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Zainab Hawa Bangura would never have dared to put forth their names as presidential candidates in their respective countries. They may have lost the elections, but the unprecedented acts sent a clear statement to the women in the sub region. The statement seemed to say, war and violent conflict have taught women that they have to be actors and not spectators in their own destinies. **This is clearly progress.**

Women and Violence: The civil wars that raged in Sierra Leone and Liberia showed another part of us women never considered. Like men women will prey on the weak if given the opportunity; and the weak in these wars remain women and children. Women tortured pregnant women; women organized forced sex rinks for their male counterparts and held women down to be raped while they looked on. Women have inflicted inhumane abuses on other women. These acts proved beyond doubt that women are also capable of evil for which the women's movement vilifies men. The stereotypes that describe women as givers and not takers of life; weak and needing protection are destroyed. This can be considered as progress. But is this what the women's movements had in mind when they advocated; "women can do what men do"?

If we must consider this tragic development as progress, it would be to destroy women's prejudice against men. Women's movement in Africa must stop deluding itself that evil acts of violence against women are solely committed by men. Women are no longer passive

bystanders, they are also perpetrators. It is a hard fact, a bitter pill to swallow. The woman in the mirror may not like what she sees, but this reflection has to be taken seriously. This is not progress women anticipated. If taking the gun means self-annihilation and the perpetuation of the misery of the African woman during violent conflicts and wars, then it seems that women are losing all over again.

At the recent women's conference, Ms. Bisi Adeleye Fayemi, the Executive Director of the African Women Development Fund (AWDF), made a striking observation that women cannot defeat patriarchy by using instruments, institutions, and rules created by patriarchy. Women cannot delude themselves that they can patch patriarchal institutions to meet women's needs or play patriarchal games as a way of liberating women. Ultimately women would find themselves as "puppets mouthing the master's voice" (*A phrase borrowed from Berewa Jommo's paper delivered at the Women in Peacebuilding Conference, Nov. 4-7, 2002*).

The life of women in rebel movements did not change during their violent struggles. At the end of the wars their lives are not better either. Leaders of liberation movements may have discovered women's usefulness on battlefields but none accorded women equal opportunities once the struggle won them political powers. As soon as they entered the capitals they took on their patriarchy characters and forgot the women that contributed to their ascension to power. From not being allowed to fight, rebel movements use women as expendable soldiers on battlefields and invisible humans in peacetime. This is not progress for women. While women celebrate the progress made so far as a result of civil wars, women must reflect on the mistakes made that have challenged the fundamentals of the struggle. The fight is not against other women, the fight is not even against men per se, the fight does not involve shedding innocent blood. The fight has been, is and will always be about tearing down patriarchal structures.

CONCLUSION

African women no longer fit into the nice, neat compartments patriarchy had put them in. They are showing their capacity to function at any level, even in very male environments, like the military. The courage and leadership abilities women discover in themselves in times of violent conflicts have won them high places in peace processes, governments and at other public platforms. More than ever before women are better organized, cohesive, and articulate about what they want. It is clear that no one can undo the achievements made.

However, women cannot and should not turn a blind eye to what went wrong. Women who in the name of survival inflicted harm on other women and children must be helped to rediscover the path of the struggle. If patriarchy must go in Africa, the replacement has to be something better. It has to be about building an Africa where both genders are working as partners to promote equity, trust, care, cooperation, affection, respect for all humanity and the sanctity of life. This would indeed be progress!!

RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

There are still questions unanswered regarding women's enlistment and involvement in combat. It would be interesting to conduct a study of the women who are actively involved in the battles that raged in Liberia and Sierra Leone. How does women's involvement in combat affect communities? How has it contributed to the militarization of communities? What traditional mechanisms available to heal women warriors? The West Africa Network for Peacebuilding would be glad to source for funding to support studies conducted for and by women on the general subject: Women, Civil Wars and Post-Civil Wars.

