



Sgt. Maj. Carolina D. Johnson, U.S. Army Africa equal opportunity sergeant major, discusses Army Regulation governing wear and appearance of Army uniforms and insignia with 1st Lt. Molephi and 1st Lt. Monare during a Women's Integration working group in Botswana in April. Currently, the Botswana Defence Force has approximately 100 female officers. They now want to add enlisted females to their ranks. The working groups helped identify some of the challenges they will face while helping to mitigate any issues that may occur. Even though integrating females will be a slow process, Johnson said she was humbled to have an opportunity to be a part of the working groups. (U.S. Army Africa photo)

USARAF's Gender Integration Efforts Lead to Regional Seminar Involving 7 African Nations

By Meghan Portillo

NCO Journal

Armies in several African nations are in the early stages of integrating females into their defense forces. To do this successfully, they have turned to U.S. Army Africa for help.

USARAF has previously hosted gender-integration workshops in Botswana and Namibia. Soldiers attended the classes to discern what issues need to be addressed before they can recruit females into its enlisted ranks. Those

efforts set the stage for a week-long gender integration seminar this summer involving seven African nations.

Male and female leaders and representatives from Botswana, Namibia, Malawi, Mozambique, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Zambia, as well as from the United States and the United Nations, gathered June 23 — 27 in Windhoek, Namibia, for the first Regional Gender Mainstreaming Seminar to share ideas and best practices.



Sgt. Maj. Carolina D. Johnson, U.S. Army Africa equal opportunity sergeant major, thanks Deputy Commander of the Botswana Defense Force, Maj. Gen. Placid Segokgo, for his invitation to conduct a Women's Integration workshop. The workshop in April 2013 consisted of 35 male and female Botswana Defence Force soldiers discussing ways to help integrate females into the BDF. (U.S. Army Africa photo)

“There are some African countries that are much more forward than others [in the process of integrating females into their forces]. That’s why it’s important that we have the conference, so that these nations can share,” said Sgt. Maj. Carolina Johnson, USARAF’s equal opportunity sergeant major and one of the main organizers for the event. “Because maybe, when they look at America, they think, ‘You’re the great Westerners with all the money. Of course you do well.’ But when they hear from other countries [in Africa] that have some of the same struggles, some of the same cultural challenges, and see how they move forward, I think that has a great impact.”

Progress is slow, and culture is hard to change, Johnson said. But with perseverance and strong leadership support, she said she is confident milestones can be reached.

“Our NCOs should learn about our own history,” Johnson said. “All of these challenges that these countries are facing, they were once our challenges as well. They are traveling the same road we traveled, with some of the same struggles. We’ve been there. Brig. Gen. Peter Corey (USARAF’s deputy commanding general) spoke about how some of the same things they are dealing with now we were dealing with in the 1800s, and about how valuable females have proven themselves to be in the U.S. Army.”

Though the majority of nations that participated in the seminar do not yet have enlisted females within their forces or utilize NCOs to their full capacity, country leaders have expressed their desire for improvement in those areas. Johnson said her presence during the workshops and the presence of U.S. female NCOs at the seminar were key in setting an example and demon-

strating the manner in which the United States utilizes NCOs and empowers females.

“U.S. NCOs should take to heart these situations in other countries,” Johnson said. “They need to take advantage of all the programs we have in the U.S. that these countries are striving to attain. If somebody needs help, there are resources available to us, but oftentimes enlisted Soldiers don’t know about the programs. NCOs should be making sure every Soldier knows about the resources available to them – locally and Armywide – because sometimes you need to reach out beyond your command. NCOs should know that it’s up to them to continue to push our Army forward. Somebody has worked to get us to where we are as NCOs, and it is now our responsibility to move the Army forward.”

Working in Botswana

Michelle Gavin, the United States’ ambassador to Botswana, expressed her support for the changes taking place in Botswana. She said cultural change has not been, and will never be, an easy path – not in the United States, Botswana, nor any other nation.

“Barriers restraining women’s ability to add value to an organization remain in place only to the detriment of that organization,” she said. “It is common sense to use your entire pool of talent to build the strongest possible organization. Passion to serve is not tied to whether you are a man or woman. It is what is in your heart; it is in your commitment to country, and it is in the talents you bring to the fight. On these measures, men and women walk the same path.”

The Botswana Defence Force was established in 1977 and began recruiting female officers in 2008. Most soldiers were supportive of the idea of females in the force, but the transition was not easy, Johnson said.

“They said when [females] showed up, they didn’t know what to do with them,” she said. “Some of the ladies had master’s degrees in intel and other areas, but they didn’t know how to use them, because they were stuck on the female role within society – my girlfriend, my secretary, my coffee-maker. And so those were the roles that women assumed in the BDF. Now, I think they are all at that point where the females think, ‘I came here to be a soldier, to add value to the defense force. I’m nobody’s ‘girl.’ Don’t call me ‘sister.’ Respect me as the officer that I am.”

The first workshop came about after the BDF’s deputy commander, Maj. Gen. Placid Segokgo, sought

assistance from Maj. Gen. Patrick Donahue, US-ARAF's commanding general at the time, to integrate enlisted females into the BDF. In response to this request, Johnson and Col. Sara Simmons, USARAF's G-1 director, taught a workshop in the spring of 2013 to about 35 BDF soldiers, both male and female, to discuss their concerns and figure out what the United States could do to help make the integration of females there a success.

"The females who were [in the workshop] were very interested, and they were all ready for total integration, even in the combat units. They're ready to go forward," Simmons said. "It was great to be a part of something that is so much bigger than yourself."

The group of lieutenants – BDF NCOs were not included in the workshops, as they are not yet utilized as leaders – came up with 15 initiatives they felt would help their defense force move forward. They broke into groups to discuss different topics, analyze strengths and weaknesses, and come up with courses of action. At the end of the workshop, each group briefed BDF leadership on their initiatives.

"We really helped them to articulate it and made sure they looked at resources as well, because oftentimes, we want great ideas, but we don't consider the resources that it really will take to implement the initiative," Johnson said. "When we left, everybody was motivated. The leadership had been briefed. This is going to be implemented; it's going to help with women integration; it's going to give them fair opportunities for promotion and to excel within the defense force."

Unfortunately, after Johnson and Simmons left, not much progress was immediately made. The two remained in contact with the group, asking, "Are you moving forward? Are you implementing any of these things? Are you writing these policies?" They received little feedback.

"Of course the females want it, but they don't have the power or authority to make it happen," Johnson said. "I think their top leadership wants this as well, but the middle management is not so committed. And middle management is where it really needs to happen for change to take place."

Segokgo requested a second workshop, in the hope of spurring better progress. During the second trip in September 2013, Simmons and Johnson asked the group to choose their top three initiatives from the 15 they had previously identified.

The initiative they decided was most critical was the development of a fair physical fitness test. Without a fair test, they knew they could never expect fair promotions. Another initiative they chose was the establishment of fair housing policies. If soldiers are not able to obtain housing on-post – often the case if they do not have children – they are given very little money for off-post accommodations.

The BDF soldiers said they have to be able to live decently. They don't want nine soldiers living in a house together, or their soldiers living in the "slums."

The third initiative involved recruiting and retention. The BDF struggles with matching skill sets to job requirements, Johnson said.



A group of Botswana Defence Force soldiers discusses military customs and traditions, proper wear of uniform and appearance during a Women's Integration workshop in April 2013. (U.S. Army Africa photo)

“When they set up the recruiting process, they mimicked the Indian army,” she said. “They literally took it and changed the name. They didn’t craft it to fit their concepts. So what you saw is that they recruited this person with this skill set, but the job required a different skill set.”

The BDF lieutenants requested a revision of the requirements so that they could recruit individuals with the skill sets that were actually needed. Simmons and Johnson helped the group as they began to craft new policies.

Progress continues slowly in Botswana, but within the last year, small victories can be noted, Johnson said. Some of the females who participated in the workshops have been promoted with waivers until issues with the physical fitness test can be resolved, and the country has sent its first female soldier to the Defence Command and Staff College in Gaborone, Botswana.

Based on funding, training and housing, Botswana is not yet ready to bring enlisted females into the force, Johnson said. Through USARAF’s workshops, the BDF was able to identify some of the main roadblocks standing in the way of that goal. Now it is up to the leadership and middle management to make the changes happen, she said.

The Sharing of Ideas

As word spread about USARAF’s gender-integration work in Botswana and the similar workshops being conducted in Namibia, several countries in the region expressed interest. To facilitate the sharing of ideas

between these nations, USARAF organized a conference. Seven countries were invited, all of which participated. Botswana sent two officers – one of them a female who had participated in the previous workshops – to the first Regional Gender Mainstreaming Seminar in Namibia.

Several countries had key leaders in attendance, and all of them had leaders there who are in a position to influence positive change in their defense forces – positive change for both NCOs and females. In almost all participating nations, enlisted soldiers are not yet involved in decision-making processes. However, in addition to the United States sending female NCOs to the seminar, Malawi sent its highest ranking enlisted female, Warrant Officer I Linda Chikondi, whose rank is the Malawi Defense Force’s equivalent of a U.S. Army sergeant major. Chikondi graduated first in her class in April from Africa’s first NCO academy in Salima, Malawi, and is now an instructor at the school. Johnson said it set a high bar for many nations as they observed Chikondi and saw the success other militaries are experiencing in the area of gender mainstreaming.

“So when they see countries like Zambia, Namibia and Malawi, they are given hope,” Johnson said. “The sharing of information is how culture can be mended. [Participants] see how women have proved themselves in other forces. Culture is difficult to change, but seeing other countries in Africa succeed shows others how it impacts mission readiness, and that the change didn’t cause a whole culture to be lost.”



Col. Sara V. Simmons, U.S. Army Africa G-1, personnel director, takes notes during the opening ceremony for the Regional Gender Mainstreaming Seminar in Windhoek, Namibia, on June 24. The seminar was hosted by the Namibian Defence Forces and co-sponsored by U.S. Africa Command and U.S. Army Africa. Leaders from seven African nations were in attendance. (U. S. Army Africa photo by Julie M. Lucas)

Guest speakers from each participating country discussed their nation's assessments, challenges and best practices. Topics included housing, training and recruiting, pregnancy, women's health issues, and sexual assault.

Speakers from the Pentagon, United Nations, African Union and Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Africa Program based in Washington, D.C., helped facilitate discussions, and Brig. Gen. Corey expressed the U.S. Army's dedication to support African partners in their effort to integrate females into their forces.

"This Regional Gender Mainstreaming Seminar is directly related to the global effort to educate, promote and support gender awareness. Patriotism and national loyalty are not felt by men alone," Corey said.

Johnson said the workshops and seminar support U.S. Army Africa's mission to help Africans help themselves.

"The diversity and inclusion of females in the defense force maximizes and capitalizes on different skills, attributes, experiences and backgrounds that further enhance the defense force's capabilities and contribute to an adaptive, culturally astute force," she said.

"After the conference, I could see that enthusiasm had spread. I think it started a lot of dialogue. It is difficult to measure the return on the investment because so many different countries are involved, but they are all now talking about the way ahead."

'Their Challenges Were Once Our Own'

The topics addressed at the conference all centered on equality and fairness. Maternity leave and maternity uniforms were issues for many countries, and views on pregnancy ranged from one extreme to the other: Some viewed it as a part of life and recognized the need for policies to accommodate pregnant females. Others expressed a belief that pregnancy is a liability, the reason females shouldn't be allowed to serve in the military. Some voiced the concern that females use pregnancy as a crutch to get away with doing what they want.

Johnson said she was surprised at first that topics such as pregnancy took such a spotlight in the discussion. But she said she soon remembered that the United States went through the same process, and that it has been difficult to change our culture as well.

Females in the United States have come from having to enlist disguised as men during the Civil War to serving today as respected four-star generals. And though the U.S. has come far in granting equal respect to both sexes, the process of integrating females into combat arms military occupational specialties is still underway.

There are always going to be challenges, Johnson said, but the United States continues to make gender integration a priority for its own forces. She said she hopes the U.S. Army can continue to help African partner nations learn from our history and our progress.

"Many of the countries have equal opportunity policies, [even some] that mimic the United States'. But they don't implement them," she said. "The great challenge is enforcing the policies. Middle managers are key; they supervise and manage the lower army. They are the future. The future army depends on how they shape the personnel below them. They are the ones who implement the policies. Just like a sergeant first class in our Army, how he teaches, coaches and mentors a staff sergeant, a specialist, an E-5 and an E-4, that is the future."

Johnson said working with African nations on gender mainstreaming issues has been both frustrating and enlightening.

"I am upset about the challenges women still experience," she said. "I had to come to the reality that it is quite different from America. Here in our Army, we have clear policies and regulations about equitability, fairness. But there is no recourse for them. If I feel I am discriminated against, I have options. If she does, there is nothing she can do about it, and that is their frustration." ■

USARAF Public Affairs contributed to this story.



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