

## **Better Ways for Africa's Peacekeepers to Deal with Sexual-Based Violence**

By Golda Keng Ajode

In Somalia, a veil of shame and silence hangs over the subject of sexual and gender-based violence.

Victims are reluctant to open up, even to the closest family members, let alone report their plight to law and justice officials. And why would they - when all too often it is men in uniform who act not as protectors, but as perpetrators?

'We are facing a lot of problems,' says Naima Ali Abdullah, Head of Women Empowerment in the Somalia Ministry of Women.

'When we try to help them, they say, "You will not give me justice. What do you want from me?" The victim would say that the perpetrator will be out of prison after two or three days.'

Assistant Superintendent Monica Mndala from the Malawi Police Service encountered the same battle when she was deployed as part of the United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID).

'Women would not open up to talk. They may be suffering the most, but they won't open up to you. They were just silent, even when we used language assistants.'

For two weeks in July, Mndala, Ali Abdullah and 24 other police and government officials from Ethiopia, Malawi, Kenya and Somalia attended a training course in Addis Ababa on gender mainstreaming and sexual and gender-based violence.

The course was delivered by the Institute for Security Studies' (ISS') African Centre for Peace and Security Training (ACPST) in collaboration with the ISS' Peace Operations and Peacebuilding Division. The training was the result of a memorandum of understanding signed between the ISS and the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia's Peace Support Training Centre (PSTC) in April 2016.

'The ISS was approached to conduct the training in order that the PSTC could draw upon the depth of expertise and resources that exists within Africa and, in particular, Addis Ababa,' explains the PSTC's Colonel Elias Seyoum Abrha.

The need for this type of training is nothing if not urgent. Sexual and gender-based violence is a weapon of war that affects the most vulnerable. Peacekeepers will inevitably encounter these crimes and their victims - and when they do, they need the skills to respond with professionalism, sensitivity and confidence.

'Courses on these topics are often very theoretical. Many participants knew the theory, but didn't know how to apply it in real life. So we focused on making this course extremely practical,' says Riana Paneras, a senior researcher at the ISS in Addis Ababa. Riana was

the police commissioner in UNAMID and served in the South African Police Service for 37 years. As a course facilitator, she brings relevance and real-life examples to the training by drawing on her own extensive experience.

Meressa K Dessu, an ISS researcher and training coordinator who facilitated some of the modules, also emphasises the practical nature of the course. 'The work and planning they did aren't just classroom exercises; they're developed for on-the-ground scenarios. Participants will be able to draw on these plans when they're deployed.'

Ethiopia is a leading contributor of soldiers and police officers to African Union (AU) peacekeeping missions, and a top African contributor to United Nations (UN) missions. It is also a leading contributor of female peacekeepers to UN missions.

Although this high percentage of female peacekeepers is impressive, there is more to gender equality than numbers. 'Yes, Ethiopian women are represented in high numbers compared to others in peacekeeping, but what are they doing in the field? We always challenge that,' says Asteway Samuel, Gender Planning and Training Team Leader in Ethiopia's Ministry of National Defence.

'As a country, Ethiopia is serious about improving its profile on gender awareness,' says Golda Keng Ajode, Programme Manager at the ACPST. Colonel Abrha from the Ethiopian PSTC echoes this. 'Africa is increasingly engaging in peace support operations, where gender issues are starting to take on greater importance. The course was required to increase gender awareness and to raise pertinent questions regarding the relevance of these issues.'

The training provided by ISS is unique, because it caters for the multi-dimensional nature of peace support operations. The military, police and civilians are involved, which presents a major challenge in such operations, since their roles are often not well understood, nor clearly defined.

'In a peace support operation, someone from the police might have to be accompanied by a soldier while investigating a report of sexual violence,' explains Liezelle Kumalo, an ISS researcher and one of the course facilitators. 'The soldier might not understand why the police officer needs time to ask questions, and might want to rush them.'

Another harmful effect is the unintended 're-victimisation' of those who have suffered such crimes. Different components might conduct their own investigation; subjecting victims to multiple interviews, and each time forcing them to relive the most intimate of crimes.

'One of the most important things I have learnt from this course is the importance of having female police officers, which we don't really have in Somalia,' says Naima Ali Abdullah. This would go a long way in ensuring that sexual and gender-based violence is reported.

<http://allafrica.com/stories/201609011214.html>

For Monica Mndala, from Malawi, the course has encouraged her to make changes in her workplace. 'In my office, I have almost 40 subordinates under me,' she explains. 'Not all officers are aware of these issues.'

The AU's Agenda 2063 emphasises the need to ensure that gender equality and women's rights are realised on the continent, while the need to combat sexual violence and protect the victims of such crimes is written into the very mandate of peace support operations.

It is up to people to like Mndala and Ali Abdullah to make it happen. With the tools, knowledge and experience gained at the course, they and the other participants can become the change needed to make these goals a reality.