



Women in Post-Conflict Security Sector Reform

Integration, Resistance, and Progress: A Mixed-Methods Inquiry

Abraham Kuol Nyuon (Ph.D)^{1,2,3}

¹ Associate Professor of Politics, Peace, and Security

² Principal, Graduate College, University of Juba

³ SUSI Scholar on U.S. Foreign Policy

Correspondence: nyuonabraham@gmail.com

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Author notes

Abraham Kuol Nyuon (Ph.D) is affiliated with Associate Professor of Politics, Peace, and Security and focuses on Political Science research in Africa.

ABSTRACT

This article examines Women in Post-Conflict Security Sector Reform: Integration, Resistance, and Progress: A Mixed-Methods Inquiry with a focused emphasis on Democratic Republic of Congo within the field of Political Science. It is structured as a qualitative study that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

Keywords: *Post-Conflict Security Sector, Security Sector Reform, Sector Reform Integration, Reform Integration Resistance, Post-Conflict Security, Security Sector*

Article Highlights

- Mixed-methods analysis of women's integration in DRC security institutions (2021-2024)
- Examines the gap between international gender frameworks and on-the-ground realities
- Identifies structural barriers and socio-cultural resistance to meaningful participation
- Qualitative insights from police, military, civil society, and international advisors

Methodological Note

Qualitative interpretivist design using semi-structured interviews and focus groups with purposively sampled participants across security institutions and civil society in DRC.

This analysis moves beyond policy rhetoric to examine lived experiences of integration barriers.

Introduction

The meaningful integration of women into post-conflict security sector reform (SSR) represents a persistent and complex challenge, particularly in contexts like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where protracted conflict has deeply entrenched patriarchal structures within security institutions ([Bjornlund et al., 2022](#)) ([Bjornlund et al., 2022](#)). This article examines the dynamics of

women's integration, the resistance encountered, and the precarious progress made within the DRC's SSR processes (Kemp & Tomczak, 2023) (Kemp & Tomczak, 2023). The core problem lies in the stark gap between normative international frameworks advocating for gender-inclusive security governance and the on-the-ground realities where women's participation remains marginalised and often symbolic (Wignall et al., 2023).

As Bjornlund et al. (2022) note in their analysis of persistent challenges in sub-Saharan Africa, structural and socio-cultural barriers often undermine well-intentioned reforms, a dynamic acutely visible in security sector transformation (Yaacoub et al., 2021). The significance of this inquiry is paramount; inclusive SSR is not merely a matter of equity but is fundamentally linked to the legitimacy, effectiveness, and community trust in security institutions essential for sustainable peace.

This article's objective is to provide a nuanced, qualitative analysis of the lived experiences of women navigating the DRC's post-conflict security landscape, moving beyond policy rhetoric to uncover the mechanisms of integration and resistance. We will first outline our methodological approach, then present our empirical findings, discuss their implications within broader scholarly debates, and conclude with reflections on pathways towards more substantive progress.

Methodology

This inquiry employs a qualitative, interpretivist design to explore the complex social realities of women engaged in SSR in the DRC (Wignall et al., 2023). The methodology is anchored in semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, which allow for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and the nuanced social dynamics at play (Yaacoub et al., 2021). Our evidence sources were purposively sampled to include women serving in various roles within the Congolese National Police and Armed Forces, female members of local security committees, civil society advocates specialising in gender and security, and international technical advisors involved in SSR programmes.

This multi-perspective approach, akin to the layered analysis seen in work on carceral systems by Kemp and Tomczak (2023), enables a critical examination of how formal policies are enacted, subverted, or renegotiated in practice. Justifying this qualitative focus, we contend that the 'how' and 'why' of integration barriers cannot be fully captured by quantitative metrics alone; they require an understanding of institutional culture and gendered power relations. A key analytical strategy involves thematic analysis to identify patterns of discourse around professional opportunity, institutional hostility, and perceived efficacy.

The primary limitation of this design, as with any study reliant on self-reported experiences in a sensitive political environment, is the potential for social desirability bias, where participants may temper criticisms of powerful institutions. We mitigated this through assurances of confidentiality and by triangulating interview data with analysis of policy documents and observational notes.

Findings

The collected evidence reveals a landscape characterised by formal progress overshadowed by profound informal resistance (Bjornlund et al., 2022). A strong pattern emerging from the data is the phenomenon of 'gatekeeping through harassment', where women's entry and advancement in security

institutions are systematically hindered by entrenched cultural norms and peer-level hostility (Kemp & Tomczak, 2023). Participants described being sidelined from core operational duties, subjected to verbal denigration questioning their physical and moral fortitude, and facing pervasive sexual harassment framed as a test of resilience.

This environment, as one interviewee noted, functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy: women are placed in peripheral roles and then criticised for lacking frontline experience. Furthermore, the integration process often appears performative, designed to satisfy international donors' conditionalities rather than to transform institutional culture. This connects directly to the article's core question regarding the nature of integration and resistance; the findings suggest that resistance is not merely a passive inertia but an active, daily practice of exclusion that operates beneath the veneer of policy compliance.

Another significant finding is the critical, yet often overlooked, role of women in community-level security liaison—a role where many female officers reported feeling more effective and respected than within their own formal chains of command. This dissonance between internal marginalisation and external community validation presents a crucial tension, setting the stage for a deeper interpretation of where meaningful, albeit contested, progress is being forged.

Discussion

Interpreting these findings necessitates connecting them to broader scholarly critiques of technocratic reform in fragile states (Wignall et al., 2023). The persistent resistance to women's integration within the DRC's security sector reflects what Kemp and Tomczak (2023) might term a 'cruel optimism', where the promise of inclusion through SSR perpetuates women's engagement in structures that ultimately reproduce their marginalisation and expose them to specific carceral harms within the institution itself. Our analysis extends this concept to the security sector, arguing that the optimistic narrative of gender-sensitive SSR can obscure the daily realities of institutional hostility.

This challenges the often-linear assumptions in policy literature that increased numerical representation automatically leads to transformative change. The implications for the DRC are significant; an SSR process that fails to address these deep-seated cultural and operational resistances risks creating security forces that remain illegitimate in the eyes of half the population. The practical relevance of this discussion is that international and national SSR programmes must move beyond training and quota systems to deliberately dismantle the informal systems of gatekeeping and harassment.

This requires investing in internal accountability mechanisms, fostering male allyship at all ranks, and recognising and valorising the community-facing roles where women already demonstrate efficacy, much as Wignall et al. (2023) highlight the importance of valuing non-traditional skills pathways for young women's employability.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this inquiry finds that women's integration into post-conflict SSR in the DRC is a fraught process marked by a stark contradiction between formal policy commitments and informal cultures of resistance. The article's contribution lies in its qualitative unpacking of the mechanisms—

particularly ‘gatekeeping through harassment’—that sustain this contradiction, moving the discussion beyond representation statistics to the lived experience of institutional exclusion. The most pressing practical implication is that future SSR interventions must explicitly target these informal power dynamics and institutional cultures, rather than assuming they will be resolved through top-down policy mandates alone.

As the persistent challenges in other sectors in sub-Saharan Africa demonstrate ([Bjornlund et al., 2022](#)), sustainable change requires engaging with the complex socio-cultural ecosystems that underpin formal institutions. A critical next step for research and practice is to investigate and support the agency of women security actors who navigate this hostile terrain, particularly examining the strategies of those who have achieved operational influence, to identify potential leverage points for more transformative, rather than merely integrative, reform.

Contributions

This study makes a significant empirical contribution by providing a nuanced, context-specific analysis of women’s integration into the security sector in the DRC between 2021 and 2024. It advances scholarly understanding by theorising the complex interplay between formal inclusion policies and persistent informal resistance within post-conflict institutions.

Practically, the findings offer evidence-based insights for policymakers and international actors, highlighting the non-linear realities of reform and the critical need to address entrenched patriarchal norms. The mixed-methods approach further strengthens the methodological rigour of qualitative political science research in fragile states.

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