

# Women in Kenya's Armed Forces

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## At a Glance

- › Despite progressive legal mandates such as the 2010 Constitution and the Ministry of Defence's 2017 Gender Policy, which institutionalise gender equality and mandate a minimum 30% female representation, systemic barriers remain entrenched.
- › Female representation in the Kenya Defense Forces increased from 7.6% to 11.3% between 2013 and 2019, with peacekeeping deployments reaching approximately 19%, surpassing many troop-contributing countries.
- › Policy recommendations emphasize strengthening political will, institutionalizing comprehensive gender policies with accountability, embedding gender training, promoting mentorship, targeted recruitment and retention strategies, fostering cultural transformation, and enhancing support systems against harassment.

## Introduction

The military as an institution has long been characterised by a deeply entrenched masculine culture, closely aligned with societal gender norms, privileging physical strength, aggression, and leadership as inherently male traits. These traditional ideals have profoundly influenced perceptions about women's suitability for combat and command roles, thereby posing significant challenges to achieving full gender integration globally and particularly within Kenya's armed forces.<sup>1, 2</sup> This culture perpetuates both institutional and social barriers that restrict women's equal participation and advancement, despite the emergence of progressive legal frameworks and policy commitments aimed at promoting gender equality within the security sector.<sup>3</sup> Kenya's Ministry of Defence (MoD) responded to these challenges through the development and adoption of a comprehensive Gender Policy in 2017, which recognises gender equality as a constitutional imperative essential for maximising the potential of all personnel in fulfilling military mandates.<sup>4</sup> The policy acknowledges the evolving nature of warfare, which has shifted from traditional physical confrontations to complex technological and transnational threats such as terrorism, organised crime, and asymmetric warfare. This shift necessitates innovative and inclusive approaches to military effectiveness that integrate gender perspectives throughout recruitment, training, planning, budgeting, and operations.<sup>5, 6</sup>

Kenya's experience exemplifies a multifaceted approach anchored in constitutional mandates, progressive gender policies, targeted training programs, and institutional reforms designed to promote substantive gender equality and women's leadership within the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) and peace support operations.<sup>7, 8, 9</sup> Among notable milestones is the disbandment of the Women Service Corps in 1999, which had previously segregated women into auxiliary roles, and the subsequent integration of women into all military branches, supported by the 2010 Constitution's mandate for a minimum of 30% female representation in government and security sectors.<sup>10, 11</sup> Institutional reforms have been critical in advancing gender mainstreaming, with the International Peace Support Training Centre (IPSTC) playing a strategic role in embedding gender equality within peace support training and operations.<sup>12, 13</sup> The IPSTC's gender policy institutionalises gender mainstreaming as a core strategy, promoting equal opportunities and specialised training for women military officers in leadership, peacebuilding, and gender sensitivity.<sup>14, 15, 16</sup> However, despite progress, institutional audits reveal persistent challenges including male-dominated leadership, limited gender training capacity, cultural machismo, and inadequate accountability frameworks that must be addressed to realise full gender equality.<sup>17, 18</sup>

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At the international level, Kenya's efforts align with global frameworks such as the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and the UN Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy, which underscore the critical role of women in peacekeeping, conflict prevention, and post-conflict recovery.<sup>19, 20</sup> These frameworks maintain that female peacekeepers contribute uniquely to mission success by enhancing community engagement, facilitating communication with vulnerable populations, and serving as role models who inspire future generations of women in security and defense.<sup>21</sup> Recent continental trends illustrate a growing visibility and impact of women in African militaries and peace operations. Countries such as Ghana, South Africa, Rwanda, and Somalia have made significant strides in recruiting, deploying, and promoting women into combat and command roles, reflecting a broader shift in defense sectors across Africa.<sup>22, 23, 24</sup> Kenya's own milestones include the appointments of Major General Fatumah Ahmed as the first female Air Force Commander and Major General Joyce Sitienei to senior leadership, alongside institutional initiatives like the Prevention against Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (PSEAH) policy and Women Leadership Development Courses.<sup>25, 26</sup>

Despite these advances, challenges persist. Societal patriarchy and entrenched cultural stereotypes continue to influence recruitment, retention, and informal institutional norms that restrict women's access to combat roles and leadership positions.<sup>27</sup> The MoD Gender Policy acknowledges barriers such as prevailing stereotypes, work-life balance difficulties, and gender disparities across ranks, calling for sustained political will, resource allocation, and accountability to translate policy into substantive equality.<sup>28</sup> Within the broader security sector, gender mainstreaming remains uneven. Kenya's National Police Service (NPS), for example, faces significant challenges due to its masculinist culture and low female representation, with only 22.5% women compared to the constitutional minimum of 33.3%.<sup>29</sup> Despite initiatives like gender desks and child protection units, the NPS lacks strategic oversight and accountability mechanisms, limiting the effectiveness of gender-responsive service delivery.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the experience of female soldiers in peacekeeping missions across Africa highlights ongoing operational and cultural challenges. Studies of Zambian female soldiers deployed in the Central African Republic reveal their active engagement in community protection, human rights advocacy, and peacebuilding, while facing male chauvinism, sexual harassment, and insufficient troop numbers that undermine their effectiveness and well-being.<sup>31</sup> Parallel experiences in the Nigerian Armed Forces illustrate similar challenges and progress. Nigeria, historically patriarchal and male-dominated, has seen women expand their roles in combat, leadership, and peacekeeping, influenced by global advocacy and UNSC Resolution 1325, yet continues to grapple with entrenched socio-cultural barriers, sexual

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harassment, and limited implementation of gender mainstreaming policies.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, research from South Africa underscores how gender-neutral approaches often compel women to assimilate masculine norms, suppress feminine traits, and face resistance that undermines their authority and inclusion despite formal equality policies.<sup>33</sup> These findings emphasise the necessity of integrating gender studies and human rights training into military curricula, adopting recruitment quotas, and fostering regional and international cooperation to support female peacekeepers. Recognising “equivalency” rather than strict equality, valuing complementary gendered strengths, emerges as essential for fostering inclusive military cultures aligned with contemporary peacekeeping missions.<sup>34, 35</sup>

In sum, Kenya's journey toward full gender integration in its military and security sectors exemplifies the complex interplay of constitutional mandates, institutional reforms, cultural transformation, and international frameworks necessary to overcome persistent barriers. Sustained political will, comprehensive training, resource allocation, and robust accountability mechanisms remain critical to translating policy commitments into substantive equality and operational effectiveness.

### Historical Evolution

The disbandment of the Women Service Corps (WSC) in 1999 marked a pivotal moment in Kenya's military history, transitioning from segregated auxiliary roles for women toward their full integration across all branches of the armed forces.<sup>36</sup> The WSC had functioned as a separate unit, confining women to non-combat, supportive roles and reinforcing gendered divisions within the military hierarchy. This segregation not only limited women's career pathways but also entrenched perceptions of military effectiveness as inherently masculine, excluding women from frontline and leadership positions. The decision to disband the WSC was driven by a growing recognition of the need to dismantle institutional segregation and promote equal opportunities across ranks and units. This structural change was anchored by the promulgation of the 2010 Constitution, which mandated a minimum of 30% female representation in government and security sectors, providing a robust legal foundation for institutional reforms and gender policies.<sup>37, 38</sup> The Constitution's two-thirds gender rule was a landmark provision that challenged entrenched patriarchal norms and aimed to accelerate women's inclusion in public service, including the military.

Following the constitutional mandate, the MoD institutionalised these commitments through the 2017 Gender Policy, which explicitly promotes gender mainstreaming as essential to operational effectiveness and inclusivity.<sup>39</sup> The policy recognises that

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modern military challenges require diverse skills and perspectives, including those brought by women. It emphasises the integration of gender considerations across recruitment, training, planning, budgeting, and operational activities, aiming to transform both formal structures and informal cultures within the armed forces. This historical evolution mirrors broader societal shifts in Kenya, where constitutional reforms, women's rights movements, and international gender equality agendas have challenged patriarchal norms across various sectors. The military's transformation, however, has been gradual and uneven, with formal policies often preceding cultural acceptance. Women's integration into combat and leadership roles remains contested, shaped by enduring stereotypes about gender roles and military effectiveness.<sup>40</sup> Many male personnel continue to associate combat readiness and command capabilities with masculine traits such as physical strength and aggression, perpetuating resistance to women's full participation.

Nonetheless, the disbandment of the WSC symbolised a commitment to structural change, enabling women to access a broader range of military occupations and career pathways. It opened opportunities for women to serve in combat roles, participate in peacekeeping missions, and assume leadership positions previously inaccessible to them. This shift has been critical in redefining military culture and expanding the institutional understanding of capability beyond traditional gender norms. The integration process has also been supported by targeted capacity-building initiatives and international partnerships, which have helped to professionalise women's roles within the military and address operational challenges unique to female personnel. Over time, increasing numbers of women have demonstrated competence and leadership in diverse military functions, gradually challenging stereotypes and fostering greater acceptance within the armed forces.

### Legal and Policy Reforms

Kenya's gender policy framework aligns closely with international commitments such as the UNSCR 1325, which calls for increased participation of women in peace and security efforts, and the UN Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy, which aims to achieve 25% female representation in uniformed peacekeeping roles by 2028.<sup>41, 42,</sup>  
<sup>43</sup> These frameworks have provided normative guidance and political impetus for Kenya to integrate gender equality within its military structures and operations.

The 2017 Ministry of Defence Gender Policy represents a comprehensive effort to institutionalise gender mainstreaming within the armed forces, recognising diversity and inclusivity as operational imperatives. It mandates the establishment of gender

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focal points within military units, responsible for promoting gender-responsive recruitment and career advancement guidelines, and the integration of gender training into military curricula.<sup>44, 45</sup> These focal points serve as advocates and coordinators for gender equality initiatives, ensuring that gender considerations are embedded in decision-making processes at all levels. Training programs such as the Female Military Officers Course and the Women's Military Peace Operations Course have been instrumental in enhancing professional development and deployment readiness, supporting Kenya's leadership in deploying female peacekeepers globally.<sup>46, 47</sup> These courses provide specialised instruction on leadership, gender sensitivity, peacebuilding, and operational planning, equipping female officers with the skills necessary to excel in diverse military roles. Importantly, the integration of gender perspectives into training curricula also raises awareness among male personnel, fostering a more inclusive institutional culture that values the contributions of women.

Kenya's legal and policy reforms extend beyond formal mandates to include accountability mechanisms such as regular gender audits and reporting frameworks designed to monitor progress and identify gaps.<sup>48, 49</sup> These mechanisms provide data-driven insights into the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming efforts and highlight areas requiring targeted intervention. However, implementation challenges persist, including limited resources allocated for gender mainstreaming, insufficient gender training capacity, and resistance within male-dominated leadership structures.<sup>50, 51</sup> Moreover, gender policies have increasingly acknowledged the importance of substantive equality, recognising that formal equality, treating men and women identically, is insufficient to address the unique challenges women face in military environments. For example, the Ministry of Defence Gender Policy addresses issues such as maternity leave, family separation during deployments, and gender-based harassment, aiming to create a supportive institutional environment conducive to women's retention and career progression.

Despite these policy advances, cultural and institutional barriers remain significant. Entrenched patriarchal norms and militarised masculinities continue to shape informal practices and attitudes that limit women's access to combat roles and senior leadership positions. Gender stereotypes persist, often manifesting in informal exclusion from critical assignments or leadership opportunities. Additionally, the lack of comprehensive gender-sensitive communication strategies and underdeveloped mentorship programs hinder women's ability to navigate military careers effectively. The policy framework also intersects with Kenya's broader security sector reforms, including efforts to enhance gender mainstreaming within the NPS, which faces its

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own challenges related to masculinist culture and low female representation.<sup>52</sup> While gender desks and child protection units have been established within the NPS, strategic oversight and accountability mechanisms remain limited, curtailing the effectiveness of gender-responsive service delivery.

In peacekeeping contexts, Kenya's gender policies align with international mandates emphasising women's critical role in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and post-conflict recovery. Female peacekeepers contribute uniquely to mission success by facilitating community engagement, improving protection of vulnerable populations, and serving as role models who inspire future generations of women in security and defense.<sup>53</sup> Kenya's commitment to increasing female representation in peacekeeping missions has translated into tangible outcomes, with female personnel constituting approximately 19% of Kenyan peacekeepers, surpassing many other troop-contributing countries. In summary, Kenya's legal and policy reforms have laid a strong foundation for advancing gender equality within the armed forces. These reforms have institutionalised gender mainstreaming, expanded training opportunities, and established accountability mechanisms. Yet, the full realisation of these policies requires sustained political will, resource allocation, and cultural transformation to overcome persistent barriers and achieve substantive equality.

### Institutional Achievements

The IPSTC has played a central role in advancing gender mainstreaming and women's integration in Kenya's armed forces through comprehensive training, leadership development, and institutional reforms.<sup>54, 55</sup> As a regional centre of excellence, IPSTC's mandate includes equipping military personnel with the necessary skills to implement gender-sensitive approaches in peace support operations, thereby enhancing operational effectiveness and fostering institutional inclusivity.<sup>56</sup> IPSTC's gender mainstreaming initiatives encompass specialised training programs, gender focal points, mentorship schemes, and gender-sensitive communication strategies that collectively create a supportive environment for women in the military.<sup>57, 58</sup> The centre's strategic plan (2016–2019) explicitly prioritised inclusivity and gender equality by mandating gender-responsive training modules addressing the specific challenges faced by women in military contexts, while also underscoring the operational benefits of gender diversity.<sup>59</sup> A flagship program is the Female Military Officers Course, co-organised with UN Women, which enhances professional development, leadership skills, and deployment readiness among female military personnel.<sup>60</sup> This course tackles barriers such as limited leadership opportunities and gender-based discrimination by equipping participants with negotiation skills,

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leadership competencies, and gender-sensitive operational planning techniques.<sup>61</sup> The success of this program is reflected in the increased deployment of Kenyan women in peacekeeping missions, with female representation reaching approximately 19%, surpassing many other troop-contributing countries.<sup>62</sup> Further reinforcing Kenya's commitment, the Women's Military Peace Operations Course (WMPOC), launched in 2026 at the Humanitarian Peace Support School in Nairobi, exemplifies IPSTC's role in cultivating a pipeline of skilled female leaders for United Nations peace operations.<sup>63</sup> WMPOC aligns with the UN Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy, targeting 25% female representation by 2028, and includes rigorous training on gender mainstreaming, operational leadership, and conflict-sensitive peacekeeping approaches.<sup>64</sup> Institutionally, IPSTC has facilitated the establishment of gender focal points within military units, serving as advocates for gender mainstreaming and providing critical support to female personnel.<sup>65, 66</sup> These focal points promote gender-responsive recruitment, retention, and career advancement policies designed to dismantle systemic barriers.<sup>67</sup> This complements broader Ministry of Defence initiatives, such as the 2017 Gender Policy, which institutionalises accountability frameworks and gender mainstreaming structures across the armed forces.<sup>68</sup> IPSTC's gender training explicitly addresses entrenched patriarchal cultural norms and institutional resistance, promoting behavioural change among military personnel and emphasising that gender equality enhances operational effectiveness rather than undermining it.<sup>69, 70</sup> This cultural transformation is vital for dismantling stereotypes that associate combat and leadership roles exclusively with masculinity, historically marginalising women within the armed forces.<sup>71, 72</sup>

Communication barriers within the security sector pose additional challenges. Existing communication structures often fail to effectively promote women's participation or address their concerns, while feedback mechanisms, mentorship programs, and gender-sensitive communication strategies remain underdeveloped.<sup>73</sup> IPSTC has responded by developing gender-sensitive communication frameworks aimed at enhancing internal dialogue, mentorship, and support networks, which are essential for fostering inclusive institutional cultures and empowering female personnel.<sup>74, 75</sup> Training programs also incorporate modules addressing gender-based challenges such as sexual harassment, maternity leave, and family separation during deployments, issues often overlooked by gender-neutral policies.<sup>76, 77</sup> By integrating these concerns, IPSTC prepares military leaders to implement substantive equality measures that accommodate women's unique needs, thereby reducing attrition and enhancing career progression prospects.<sup>78</sup> Beyond national boundaries, IPSTC enhances Kenya's regional and international peacekeeping roles. Female peacekeepers trained at IPSTC serve as vital connectors to local communities, especially

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women and children, facilitating trust-building, intelligence gathering, and culturally sensitive engagement that male peacekeepers may find challenging.<sup>79, 80</sup> This operational advantage underscores the strategic importance of IPSTC's gender mainstreaming and capacity-building initiatives, contributing to Kenya's reputation as a leading troop contributor with a relatively high proportion of female peacekeepers.<sup>81, 82</sup>

IPSTC also promotes mentorship programs and peer support networks that enhance female officers' retention and career progression, addressing gaps identified in communication and feedback mechanisms within the security sector.<sup>83, 84</sup> These initiatives cultivate an institutional culture valuing diversity and inclusivity, essential for sustainable gender integration.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, IPSTC employs gender-responsive monitoring and evaluation frameworks to assess the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming efforts, using evidence-based approaches to inform continuous policy refinement and training adaptation.<sup>86</sup> This accountability fosters an environment where gender equality is a measurable outcome integrated into military performance metrics.<sup>87</sup> Collaboration with regional and international partners amplifies IPSTC's impact by facilitating the exchange of best practices and harmonising gender mainstreaming standards across peace support operations in Africa.<sup>88, 89</sup> This regional leadership role enhances Kenya's strategic positioning in peacekeeping forums and contributes to broader continental efforts to increase women's representation in security sectors.<sup>90</sup>

### Persistent Barriers

Despite significant institutional achievements, persistent barriers continue to impede the full integration and advancement of women in Kenya's armed forces. Deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and militarised masculinities remain pervasive, shaping informal institutional cultures that resist women's participation in combat and senior leadership roles.<sup>91, 92</sup> These cultural attitudes valorise masculine traits such as physical strength, aggression, and dominance, often marginalising feminine qualities and reinforcing stereotypes about women's capabilities.<sup>93</sup> Gender stereotypes manifest in informal exclusion from critical assignments, limited access to command positions, and unequal distribution of operational roles. Even where formal policies allow women in combat roles, societal and institutional resistance frequently results in women being relegated to support functions or facing barriers to promotion.<sup>94, 95</sup> The military's valorisation of masculine norms often compels women to suppress feminine traits or assimilate masculine behaviours to gain acceptance, creating tension between personal identity and institutional expectations.<sup>96</sup> Sexual harassment and gender-based violence remain significant obstacles within the

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military environment. Female personnel report experiences of harassment both within Kenya and during peacekeeping deployments, undermining morale, operational effectiveness, and career progression.<sup>97, 98</sup> Although policies such as the PSEAH exist, implementation and enforcement gaps persist, limiting their effectiveness.<sup>99</sup> Institutional resistance also manifests in limited gender training capacity, inadequate accountability frameworks, and insufficient resource allocation for gender mainstreaming initiatives.<sup>100, 101</sup> Male-dominated leadership structures often lack commitment or awareness to champion gender equality, resulting in slow policy implementation and minimal cultural change.<sup>102</sup>

Work-life-balance challenges, including insufficient maternity leave policies and family support services, disproportionately affect women and contribute to attrition and stalled career progression.<sup>103</sup> Gender-neutral policies frequently fail to address these substantive equality issues, overlooking the unique needs of female personnel.<sup>104</sup> Communication within the military remains a critical barrier. Existing channels often inadequately promote women's participation or address their concerns, while feedback mechanisms and mentorship programs are underdeveloped.<sup>105</sup> This limits women's ability to influence institutional culture or advocate for necessary reforms. Broader security sector challenges also impact women's integration. For example, Kenya's NPS struggles with a masculinist culture and low female representation.<sup>106</sup> Although gender desks and child protection units have been established, strategic oversight and accountability mechanisms remain limited, curtailing the effectiveness of gender-responsive service delivery.<sup>107</sup> Operational challenges in peacekeeping contexts further compound barriers. Female soldiers deployed in conflict zones often face male chauvinism, sexual harassment, and insufficient troop numbers, undermining their effectiveness and well-being.<sup>108</sup> Similar challenges are reported in other African militaries, such as Nigeria and South Africa, where entrenched socio-cultural barriers and institutional inertia persist.<sup>109, 110</sup> These persistent barriers underscore the complexity of translating formal gender equality policies into substantive equality and cultural transformation within the military. Overcoming them requires sustained political will, comprehensive gender training, robust accountability, and targeted support mechanisms that address both institutional structures and cultural norms.

## **Policy Recommendations**

### ***Tackling Systematic Cultural Biases to Remove the Glass Ceiling***

The persistent underrepresentation and limited advancement of women in Kenya's armed forces, despite progressive legal frameworks and gender policies, highlight the urgent need to address deep-rooted cultural biases and institutional barriers. The military's historically masculine culture, characterised by ideals of physical strength, aggression, and leadership, continues to shape perceptions that marginalise women's roles, particularly in combat and senior command positions. To dismantle the remaining glass ceiling, a holistic and sustained approach is required, integrating legal mandates, institutional reforms, cultural transformation, and targeted capacity-building.

### ***Strengthen Political Will and Leadership Commitment***

Effective gender integration begins at the highest levels of military and political leadership. Sustained political will must be demonstrated through clear public commitments, resource allocation, and enforcement of gender policies. Military leaders should actively champion gender equality as a strategic imperative, recognising that diverse leadership enhances operational effectiveness and mission success. This includes holding commanders and units accountable for meeting gender targets and fostering inclusive environments. Leadership training should incorporate gender sensitivity components to equip commanders with the knowledge and skills to support female personnel effectively.

### ***Institutionalise Comprehensive Gender Policies and Accountability Frameworks***

Kenya's Ministry of Defence Gender Policy provides a strong foundation but requires rigorous implementation and monitoring. Gender mainstreaming structures, such as gender focal points and dedicated offices at strategic, operational, and tactical levels, must be fully operationalised with adequate human and financial resources. Establishing clear gender performance indicators and integrating these into military evaluation and promotion criteria will enhance accountability. Regular gender audits and reporting mechanisms should be institutionalised to track progress and identify gaps. Furthermore, gender policies must explicitly address issues such as sexual harassment, maternity and family leave, and work-life balance to create a supportive environment conducive to women's retention and advancement.

### ***Embed Gender Training and Capacity Building Across All Ranks***

Comprehensive gender training is essential to transform institutional culture and challenge entrenched stereotypes. Training curricula at all military education levels

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should integrate gender studies, human rights, and the operational benefits of gender diversity. Specialised programs like the Female Military Officers Course and the Women's Military Peace Operations Course should be expanded and made accessible to more women. Additionally, all personnel, including men, should receive regular gender sensitivity training to foster respect and collaboration. Training should also address unconscious bias, masculinised norms, and the value of feminine leadership traits such as empathy and negotiation skills, which are critical for modern peacekeeping and conflict resolution.

### ***Promote Mentorship, Networking, and Leadership Development Programs***

To bridge the gap between policy and practice, structured mentorship and peer support networks for female officers are vital. Mentorship programs should connect junior female personnel with senior women leaders who can provide guidance, advocacy, and career development support. Formalised leadership development initiatives, including workshops, seminars, and leadership courses, should be institutionalised to prepare women for command roles. These programs can help build confidence, enhance leadership competencies, and create a pipeline of qualified women ready to assume senior positions, thereby addressing the "leaky pipeline" phenomenon.

### ***Implement Targeted Recruitment and Retention Strategies***

Recruitment efforts must be tailored to attract qualified women, including outreach to diverse communities and professions that align with military needs. Quota systems should be strategically designed to increase female representation without fostering tokenism, ensuring that recruitment targets translate into substantive participation. Retention strategies should address gender-specific challenges such as family responsibilities, deployment-related separations, and workplace harassment. Flexible policies, including parental leave, childcare support, and safe reporting mechanisms for abuse, are necessary to create an enabling environment that encourages women to sustain their military careers.

### ***Foster Cultural Transformation Through Communication and Awareness***

Changing deeply ingrained cultural perceptions requires sustained communication strategies that promote positive narratives about women's roles in the military. Security institutions should develop gender-sensitive communication campaigns that highlight women's contributions to operational success and peacekeeping effectiveness. Internal messaging must challenge stereotypes and masculinist norms, emphasising that gender equality strengthens rather than undermines military capabilities. Creating safe spaces for dialogue, feedback, and the sharing of experiences

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can empower women and foster institutional empathy. Engaging male personnel as allies in gender mainstreaming initiatives is crucial to dismantling resistance and fostering inclusive cultures.

### ***Enhance Support Systems Addressing Sexual Harassment and Gender-Based Violence***

Sexual harassment remains a significant barrier to women's participation and advancement. Military institutions must establish robust, confidential, and accessible reporting and support mechanisms for victims. This includes clear policies, victim-centered procedures, and disciplinary measures against perpetrators. Training programs should educate all personnel on recognising, preventing, and responding to sexual harassment and gender-based violence. Psychological support services and counselling should be made available to affected personnel. Institutional commitment to zero tolerance for harassment must be visibly enforced to build trust and ensure safe working environments.

### ***Integrate Gender Perspectives in Operational Planning and Peacekeeping Missions***

Operational effectiveness in contemporary conflict environments requires gender-responsive approaches. Military planning and execution should systematically incorporate gender analyses to address the distinct needs of women, men, and vulnerable groups. Female peacekeepers play a critical role in community engagement, intelligence gathering, and protection of civilians, which should be strategically leveraged. Training for peacekeeping missions must include gender mainstreaming components, preparing all personnel to operate in culturally sensitive and inclusive ways. Kenya's leadership in peacekeeping training through IPSTC and partnerships with UN Women exemplify best practices that should be expanded and sustained.

### ***Strengthen Regional and International Cooperation***

Gender integration in military institutions benefits from regional collaboration and adherence to international frameworks such as the UNSCR 1325 and the UN Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy. Kenya should continue to share best practices and lessons learned with neighboring countries and regional bodies like the African Union and East African Standby Force. Mobilising resources through international partnerships, including funding for training and capacity building, will support sustained gender mainstreaming efforts. Regional cooperation can also facilitate harmonisation of gender policies and standards, contributing to a more inclusive security architecture across Africa.

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### *Adopt an Intersectional Approach to Address Multiple Forms of Discrimination*

Gender policies must recognise the diverse experiences of women in the military, including those from marginalised ethnic groups, lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and persons with disabilities. Intersectional approaches ensure that policies and programs address overlapping forms of discrimination and barriers. This requires data collection systems that capture disaggregated information and targeted interventions that promote inclusivity. By embracing diversity within gender mainstreaming, the military can foster equitable opportunities for all women, enhancing cohesion and operational effectiveness.

In conclusion, removing the glass ceiling in Kenya's armed forces demands a comprehensive strategy that tackles systemic cultural biases and institutional barriers. Legal mandates and gender policies provide a critical framework, but their success hinges on effective implementation, cultural transformation, and sustained leadership commitment. By investing in training, mentorship, recruitment, communication, and support systems, Kenya can realise substantive gender equality, enhancing both military effectiveness and the country's standing as a regional leader in peace and security. These policy recommendations offer a roadmap not only for Kenya but also for other East African and African nations striving to achieve inclusive and equitable armed forces.

### **Broader African Implications**

Kenya's experience in promoting gender integration within its armed forces offers a valuable blueprint for other African militaries aspiring to enhance women's roles in defence and peacekeeping. Its comprehensive approach combines constitutional mandates, progressive gender policies, targeted capacity-building programs, and strategic institutional reforms that collectively advance substantive gender equality despite entrenched patriarchal and masculinised security cultures. Kenya's constitutional provision mandating a minimum of 30% female representation in public bodies, including security sectors, represents a critical legal foundation that other African countries can emulate to accelerate women's inclusion. Coupled with the Ministry of Defence's Gender Policy and institutional mechanisms like gender focal points and accountability frameworks, Kenya demonstrates how legal mandates translate into operational policies and practices that promote gender mainstreaming.

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The role of the IPSTC as a regional hub for gender-responsive peacekeeping training and leadership development exemplifies effective multi-level cooperation linking national reforms to international gender equality agendas such as UNSCR 1325 and the UN Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy. Kenya's leadership in deploying female peacekeepers, with representation reaching approximately 19%, surpasses many troop-contributing countries, illustrating the operational benefits of gender integration. However, Kenya's experience also highlights the complexities of adapting such reforms across diverse African contexts. Socio-cultural norms, institutional capacities, and political will vary widely among countries, influencing the pace and extent of gender integration. For instance, countries like Botswana and Nigeria face legal exclusions, slower policy implementation, or stronger patriarchal resistance, underscoring that constitutional and policy frameworks alone are insufficient without sustained political commitment and cultural transformation.

The Kenyan case further underscores the necessity of addressing not only formal equality but substantive equality, recognising the unique challenges women face in military environments, including sexual harassment, work-life balance, and institutional biases. Tailored strategies that incorporate intersectional approaches, gender-sensitive training, mentorship, and support systems are essential for fostering inclusive military cultures. Regional cooperation and knowledge-sharing platforms are vital for harmonising gender mainstreaming standards and mobilising resources to support capacity-building across African militaries. Kenya's partnerships with international organisations like UN Women and its active engagement in regional peacekeeping initiatives position it as a leader in promoting gender equality within Africa's security architecture.

In conclusion, Kenya's multifaceted approach provides an inspiring and practical model for African militaries seeking to dismantle structural barriers and foster inclusive, operationally effective armed forces. The blueprint's success depends on acknowledging local socio-cultural realities, ensuring political will, allocating adequate resources, and sustaining continuous monitoring and adaptation. By embracing these principles, African nations can progressively dismantle the military glass ceiling, enhance women's leadership and participation, and contribute to more effective and equitable peace and security outcomes continent-wide.

## Conclusion

Kenya's armed forces have undergone significant transformation in integrating women, marked by legislative, institutional, and cultural shifts since the

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disbandment of the WSC in 1999, which had segregated women into auxiliary roles.<sup>111</sup> The 2010 Constitution's mandate for a minimum 30% female representation in public service, including security sectors, provided a constitutional foundation for gender integration.<sup>112</sup> This was further institutionalised by the Ministry of Defence's 2017 Gender Policy, which recognises gender equality as essential for operational effectiveness and inclusivity, embedding gender mainstreaming across recruitment, training, planning, and operations.<sup>113</sup> Despite these formal frameworks, the military's historically masculine culture, emphasizing physical strength and aggression, continues to pose challenges to women's full participation, particularly in combat and leadership roles.<sup>114, 115</sup> Patriarchal norms and militarised masculinities persist, sustaining stereotypes that limit women's access to senior positions and frontline duties.<sup>116</sup> Women often face informal exclusion, requiring assimilation of masculine traits to gain acceptance, creating tensions between identity and institutional expectations.<sup>117</sup> The IPSTC has played a pivotal role in advancing gender mainstreaming through specialised training, leadership development, and institutional reforms aligned with international mandates such as UNSCR 1325.<sup>118, 119</sup> Programs like the Female Military Officers Course and the Women's Military Peace Operations Course enhance professional skills and deployment readiness, contributing to Kenya's leading role in deploying female peacekeepers, who constitute approximately 19% of Kenyan contingents, surpassing many troop-contributing countries.<sup>120</sup> Institutional support mechanisms, including gender focal points and mentorship networks facilitated by IPSTC, address systemic barriers and foster a supportive environment for women.<sup>121</sup> Gender-sensitive communication frameworks developed by IPSTC aim to improve internal dialogue and empower female personnel, while training modules address issues such as sexual harassment, maternity leave, and family separation during deployments.<sup>122, 123</sup>

Notable female leaders such as Major General Joyce Sitienei, Major General Fatumah Ahmed, and Lieutenant Colonel Faith Mwangandi exemplify Kenya's progress in elevating women to senior and operational roles.<sup>124, 125</sup> Their careers demonstrate the tangible benefits of gender policies and training initiatives, while also highlighting ongoing challenges related to cultural resistance and institutional inertia.<sup>126, 127</sup> Persistent barriers include entrenched patriarchal culture, sexual harassment, limited gender training capacity, and insufficient accountability mechanisms.<sup>128</sup> The NPS illustrates uneven gender mainstreaming within Kenya's security sector, with low female representation and limited strategic oversight despite gender desks and child protection units.<sup>129</sup> Policy recommendations to dismantle the military glass ceiling emphasise strengthening political will, institutionalising comprehensive gender policies with accountability, embedding gender training at all levels, promoting

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mentorship and leadership development, implementing targeted recruitment and retention strategies, fostering cultural transformation through communication, and enhancing support systems against harassment.<sup>130</sup> An intersectional approach is advocated to address multiple layers of discrimination, ensuring inclusivity for women from diverse backgrounds.<sup>131</sup> Kenya's multifaceted approach offers a replicable blueprint for African militaries, combining constitutional mandates, progressive policies, capacity-building, and strategic reforms.<sup>132, 133</sup> However, adapting this model requires sensitivity to local socio-cultural realities and sustained political commitment to overcome entrenched norms and institutional resistance.<sup>134, 135</sup> In conclusion, Kenya's journey towards gender integration reveals a complex interplay of legal frameworks, institutional reforms, capacity-building, and cultural transformation. While significant progress has been made, persistent barriers necessitate ongoing efforts to realise substantive gender equality, enhance operational effectiveness, and foster inclusive military cultures aligned with global peace and security commitments.

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