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Citation for published version:

Dwyer, M & Gbla, O 2021, 'The home stress': The role of soldiers' family life on peacekeeping missions, the case of Sierra Leone', *International Peacekeeping*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2021.1996237>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/13533312.2021.1996237](https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2021.1996237)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

International Peacekeeping

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Maggie Dwyer & Osman Gbla

To cite this article: Maggie Dwyer & Osman Gbla (2021): 'The Home Stress': The Role of Soldiers' Family Life on Peacekeeping Missions, the Case of Sierra Leone, *International Peacekeeping*, DOI: [10.1080/13533312.2021.1996237](https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2021.1996237)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2021.1996237>



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Published online: 02 Nov 2021.



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'The Home Stress': The Role of Soldiers' Family Life on Peacekeeping Missions, the Case of Sierra Leone

Maggie Dwyer^a and Osman Gbla^b

^aCentre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK; ^bFourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, Tower Hill, Sierra Leone

ABSTRACT

Through the case of the Sierra Leonean deployment on the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), this study argues that family-related stress is an often-overlooked challenge in peacekeeping deployments. Using in-depth interviews with Sierra Leonean soldiers who were part of the deployment, military decision makers, and foreign advisors, this article lays out specific factors that created family-related tensions and contributed to lowered morale for Sierra Leonean peacekeepers. It demonstrates that the family-related stress on deployment is not only an issue of family separation, it is entangled with the historic trajectories of the armed forces and the sending country's socio-economic conditions. The focus on Sierra Leone highlights the additional and unique burdens that soldiers and their families may endure in troop contributions from lower-income countries.

KEYWORDS Sierra Leone; military sociology; military families; AMISOM; deployment; stress

In 2013 Sierra Leone took part in its largest international military deployment in the country's history when it sent a battalion to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). This was not only an operational achievement but one with symbolic significance. It signalled the move from a country that just seven years prior hosted a peacekeeping mission to one that could make large contributions to peacekeeping in other countries. As will be detailed, this was a difficult and dangerous deployment and assessments afterwards suggested ways to improve future deployments including additional training, equipment acquisition, and changes to internal procedures. Yet, the technical reports that followed the mission neglected one aspect that many of the contingent members said was a significant challenge: family-related stress.

Through the case of the Sierra Leonean contingent on the AMISOM mission, this study argues that family-related stress is an often-overlooked

CONTACT Maggie Dwyer  m.dwyer@ed.ac.uk

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challenge in peacekeeping deployments. The absence of families in the discussion around peacekeeping deployment fits a wider international pattern in which families are often viewed as a burden to military organizations. Militaries place unique demands on their members such as significant time, including long periods away from home, lifestyle restrictions, and risk to life. It is also a job where collective culture is vital and individual needs are often secondary. Within this professional culture families often hold an uneasy place and have been viewed by military institutions as both a hindrance and an important support mechanism.¹ While the tensions experienced by military members and their families is a regular pattern across the globe, this study highlights the importance of socio-economic conditions in understanding the place of families within military organizations. Through a focus on Sierra Leone it demonstrates additional and unique burdens that soldiers and their families may endure in troop contributions from lower-income countries.

This research is exploratory and it makes empirical contributions in three broad areas. First, it contributes a focus on Africa to the military sociology subfield of families, which is dominated by research on Western armed forces.² Academic focus on military families has grown in recent years with largescale international deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, which has placed increased attention on the effects these long-term missions have on family relationships.³ Yet, similar attention has not been given to African countries despite their growing rate of deployments on international missions, largely peacekeeping missions. This gap is especially glaring given that Africa is the largest regional contributor to peacekeeping missions.⁴ Understanding stresses that can challenge morale has significance for both domestic and international goals of improving peacekeeping operations and the experience of those that participate.

Secondly, the article contributes a micro-level perspective of peacekeeping that focuses on the everyday experiences of soldiers tasked with peacekeeping. This adds to growing literature on 'bottom-up peacekeeping' and supplements the more dominant macro-level approach to peacekeeping which focuses on international and national dimensions of the interventions.⁵ However, even as there has been a shift towards more attention to the local level of peacekeeping interventions, the experiences of individual peacekeepers have often remained overlooked, with emphasis often placed on local communities that the missions aim to protect.⁶ Our focus on

¹Ledberg and Ruffa, "Military Families: Topography of a Field."

²Heinecken and Wilén, "No Place Like Home," 416; Ledberg and Ruffa, "Military Families: Topography of a Field," 12.

³De Angelis, Smith and Segal, "Military Families," 341.

⁴De Coning, "Africa and UN Peace Operations," 213.

⁵Autesserre, "Going Micro," 492.

⁶Henry, "Parades, Parties and Pests," 372; Wallis, "Displaced Security," 480.

peacekeepers' everyday challenges allows a unique glimpse into the very human struggles and emotions that come with peacekeeping but often go unaccounted for in official documentation of the missions. While peacekeepers by the very nature of their roles are deployed away from their homes and home country, this research highlights that homelife still plays an important part in the everyday lives of peacekeepers and by extension the peacekeeping missions.

Our micro-level focus on Sierra Leone's contribution to AMISOM, specifically highlights the ground-level challenges faced on peace enforcement missions. The Sierra Leonean experience can be considered an extreme case in that the battalion was deployed for 22 months, significantly longer than standard peacekeeping deployments. This extended deployment exacerbated many of the challenges. Still, many of their experiences in Somalia highlight common issues faced by peacekeepers taking on increasingly robust mandates.⁷ These mandates regularly require peacekeepers to 'perform multiple and complex tasks in a context of ongoing violence, including stabilisation efforts and even counterinsurgency'.⁸ Further, many troop-contributing countries to these missions are deploying 'on the cheap' with limited support systems for soldiers. While academic literature and policy reports have identified challenges related to equipment and logistics from lower-income contributing countries, we also highlight how financial constraints can affect family-related stress while on deployment.

Lastly, the article contributes to the contemporary history of Sierra Leone, specifically its military history. It documents and examines an important moment in the history of the military and an achievement that is linked to the post-war security reform process.⁹ It highlights challenges within the deployment which effected morale and could alter soldiers' view of their leadership.¹⁰ Understanding the dynamics of this deployment, including challenges that were not part of formal command reporting, is especially relevant given the country's goal of returning to peacekeeping contributions.¹¹

This article will first explain the research methodology before turning to examine research focused on the role of families within military organizations. Particular focus will be placed on family-related stress during deployment periods. Attention will then narrow to the case of Sierra Leone and the

⁷Karlsruud, *The UN at War*.

⁸Elfversson, Bromley and Williams, "Urban Peacekeeping Under Siege," 160.

⁹Albrecht and Haenlein, "Dissolving the Internal-External Divide."

¹⁰Sample of work which focuses on changing perceptions of soldiers following peacekeeping participation include Dwyer, "Peacekeeping Abroad, Trouble Making at Home"; Cunliffe, "From Peacekeepers to Praetorians"; Agyekum, "Peacekeeping Experiences as Triggers of Introspection."

¹¹The goal of restarting peacekeeping contributions was expressed by numerous interviewees at the Peacekeeping Directorate at the Ministry of Defense Headquarters. We observed training by the British military in February 2020 at the Peacekeeping Mission Training Centre in Sierra Leone to prepare for this goal.

increasing attention on peacekeeping as part of the security reform process that followed the country's civil war. The latter half of the article focuses on conditions of the AMISOM deployment for the Sierra Leonean contingent and how these created stress for soldiers as well as their families. Deployment-related stress is generally compounded, with one issue piling on top of another over a course of time and as such it is important to view the myriad of issues that soldiers experienced. We explain several of the broad hardship conditions such as combat exposure and harsh living conditions, before turning to family stresses. The family-focused section demonstrates that the 'home stress' soldiers endured was not limited to a single concern, rather it was a combination of multiple, overlapping issues that led to tensions for soldiers and their families back home. The article then concludes with a brief discussion of the return home, which for many soldiers was dominated by the ongoing Ebola crisis at the time.

Research Methods

This research centres on the experience and perceptions of peacekeepers from the first (and so far only) Sierra Leonean battalion (LEOBATT1) to deploy to AMISOM. In total, we interviewed fifty-one returned peacekeepers, with the first round of interviews taking place in 2016 and the second round in 2020.¹² All interviewees were men, largely because the LEOBATT1 only deployed men.¹³ The interviews were carried out across three different military bases in addition to the Ministry of Defense headquarters with permission and assistance from base commanders.¹⁴ The variety of locations helped to ensure a broader selection of interviewees, including individuals at more prestigious locations such as military headquarters and training centres as well as soldiers based away from the capital. While we are focused on the LEOBATT1 contingent, we also conducted interviews with Sierra Leonean soldiers who had taken part in other peacekeeping missions, including the regional Economic Community of West African State Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) mission to Liberia and the United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), and will refer to several of these discussions throughout to demonstrate trends that expand across multiple missions and across time.

The interviews with returned peacekeepers were valuable in providing insights into the lived realities of soldiers on the mission. Our interviews

¹²The 2016 interviews were conducted by author 1 and the 2020 interviews were conducted by authors 1 and 2. Other than the unit commander, all interviewees have been anonymized. References to rank are the rank at the time of interview, some of which are higher than the rank at time of deployment.

¹³LEOBATT2 had trained and planned to deploy women but LEOBATT1 only deployed male soldiers.

¹⁴Interviews took place in Lungi (2016/2020), Hastings (2020), Kambia (2016), and the Ministry of Defense headquarters in Freetown (2020).

with returned peacekeepers were of a broad nature, focused on their experiences in the lead-up to the deployment, on deployment, and the effects of the experience upon return home. As such, the focus on families was not the sole intention of the interviews, rather it was a theme that came up over and over again in the open-ended interviews. While we focus this article specifically on the family-related stress that many interviewees described, this does not negate the other positive effects that many soldiers also discussed. These include additional pay, training experiences, opportunities to engage with foreign troops, chance to travel, and a general sense of pride at their role in the mission. As will be discussed throughout this article, soldiers held mixed feelings about the experience, acknowledging the many benefits while also expressing frustration at aspects of the deployment.

In addition to the returned peacekeepers, we interviewed senior decision-makers within the Sierra Leone Ministry of Defense, many of which were based in the Peacekeeping Directorate. Finally, we interviewed four British military advisors who held long-term positions advising the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) and spoke to over a dozen British trainers who were in the country for only several weeks to carry out specific peacekeeping training. These decision-makers and advisors helped provide an overarching understanding of the institutional and state motivations for peacekeeping deployments as well as the broader challenges faced in deploying abroad. Through these foreign advisors, we were also shown after-action reports and recommendations written immediately after the deployment, which provide further contextual details from leadership on the AMISOM mission.

The Role of Families in Military Life

The family and the military are two social institutions that compete for a service member's time, loyalty, and energy.¹⁵ The military is viewed as a particularly 'greedy' occupation because it places demands on individuals that generally go beyond traditional jobs and effect family life.¹⁶ Common 'demands that characterize the military lifestyle include risk of injury or death, geographic mobility, separations resulting from deployments, training, and temporary duties, residence in foreign countries, and normative constraints that dictate proper behavioural norms'.¹⁷ In countries with laws that guard employees from excessive work hours, military personnel is often not included in the protection. Rather, service members are regularly required to be on duty continuously and to work long and irregular hours,

¹⁵Segal, "The Military and the Family as Greedy Institutions."

¹⁶*ibid.*

¹⁷De Angelis and Segal, "Transitions in the Military and the Family," 25.

particularly during periods of high operational tempos. These patterns often place significant burdens on families and create stress between the service members and their families.

Over the last several decades, many military organizations worldwide have attempted to address this tension with increased social-psychological support for families and service members, alongside other policies that created more flexibility in lifestyles. These were not purely altruistic moves, but rather the family tensions were deemed 'bad for business'. The lack of family support 'impacts negatively on the operational readiness of soldiers and, in the longer term, can have negative effects on recruitment and retention'.¹⁸ As countries moved away from national drafts and most militaries shifted to all-volunteer forces, it became especially important to try to retain highly qualified individuals who may otherwise leave for careers that are more conducive to family life. Moelker et al. note that now nearly all military organizations provide some level of social-psychological support to military personnel and families before and after missions. Yet they also highlight that the level of support can vary greatly.¹⁹ As will be demonstrated later, the support in Sierra Leone is minimal, a trend that is likely linked to economic issues, newness of large-scale deployments abroad, and general lower expectations for state support.

Within the multiple difficulties faced by soldiers and their families, separation due to operational deployment 'is perhaps the most important cause of stress for military families'.²⁰ For close family members of deployed soldiers, the stress often relates to significant shifts in daily routines, additional caregiving responsibilities, an absence of emotional support, and fears of loss or injury of the deployed family member.²¹ Deployed military personnel often experience a sense of isolation due to separation from family life, with many reporting feeling left out of important family events and decisions due to deployment.²² Increased concerns about infidelity and restrictions on sharing of information related to difficult deployment experiences are other common causes of family strain while deployed.²³ Research, based largely on Western forces, has found that a lack of family support while in theatre increases personnel's risk of mental health problems.²⁴ Multiple studies, also based primarily on U.S. and U.K. personnel, have shown longer deployments correlate with higher rates of distress for deployed

¹⁸Moelker et al. *Military Families and War in the 21st Century*, 6.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰Ledberg and Ruffa, "Military Families: Topography of a Field," 4.

²¹Lowe et al. "Impact of Military Deployment," 17–18.

²²Heinecken and Ferreira "Fighting for Peace," 55; Greene et al. "How Communication with Families Can Both Help and Hinder."

²³Hawkins et al. *What We Know about Military Family Readiness*.

²⁴Greene et al. "How Communication with Families Can Both Help and Hinder."

soldiers as well as elevated rates of mental health problems in spouses.²⁵ Furthermore, deployments with combat exposure are linked to higher rates of mental health problems and strained family relations upon return home.²⁶

The many findings highlighting links between deployments and family stress have led to an increased attention on the role of communication between family and service members while deployed.²⁷ While there is acknowledgement that regular communication could have a negative effect for individuals with strained family relations, overall research has indicated that greater access to communication with family back home can serve as a way to boost morale, ease the sense of isolation while deployed, and help the process of family reconnection post-deployment.²⁸ Studies in Western armed forces have found an increased expectations of servicemembers and their families for regular communication while away, especially with new digital technologies.²⁹

While it is universal that military personnel and their families endure high levels of stress when deployed to combat missions, the specific reasons for this stress are often closely linked to conditions in the troops' home countries and thus can differ greatly across the globe. Research on deployments has been dominated by data from the U.S., which needs caution when applied to other contexts given the exceptional size of the U.S. defense budget, advanced infrastructural and institutional support for deployments, access to leading technologies, and long experience of deploying forces far afield. These 'advantages' are often not matched in forces from lower-income countries. Further, little is known about expectations for family assistance from soldiers in many Global South countries or the types of support offered while deployed. This article goes beyond observations that deployments are stressful to lay out specific factors that created family-related tensions and contributed to lowered morale for Sierra Leonean peacekeepers. Many of these are linked to the historic context of the armed forces and socio-economic factors in the country, which have important differences to the conditions in many Western armed forces.

The economic conditions in Sierra Leone have shaped the demographics of the armed forces and the role of soldiers within their broader social networks. Sierra Leone is ranked as one of the poorest countries in the world with a GNI per capita in 2019 that was less than half the average in

²⁵Buckman et al. "The Impact of Deployment Length on the Health and Well-Being of Military Personnel"; Adler et al. "The Impact of Deployment Length."

²⁶Hawkins et al. *What We Know about Military Family Readiness*.

²⁷Carter and Renshaw, "Spousal Communication During Military Deployments."

²⁸Greene et al. "How Communication with Families Can Both Help and Hinder." Hawkins et al. *What We Know about Military Family Readiness*.

²⁹Schumm et al. "Expectations, Use, and Evaluation of Communication Media"; Greene et al. "How Communication with Families Can Both Help and Hinder."

sub-Saharan Africa.³⁰ Limited opportunities for consistent, salaried employment makes a job in the armed forces coveted in Sierra Leone as well as in other low-income countries on the continent. A job in the armed forces are perceived by many applicants as prestigious and an avenue for further education and professional training. Additional benefits such as food rations and housing are important perks that most other jobs would not come with. The perceived advantages of life in the military mean that when individuals join the armed forces in Africa, they generally stay in it throughout their career. As such, many lower-income African countries do not have a retention problem within the armed forces. Rather post-conflict countries in particular often have a problem of an oversized military when a large fighting force is no longer needed and post-war economic conditions necessitate downsizing of armed forces.

These broad patterns have several implications for the role of families in the armed forces. In many African countries, the average age of soldiers is likely older than in locations where retention rates are lower and individuals leave the service for more desirable jobs elsewhere. This may especially be the case in post-conflict countries, like Sierra Leone, when recruitment has been slowed as one aspect of the downsizing of the force following civil war.³¹ While the exact age distribution of the LEOBATT1 contingent is not known, multiple Sierra Leonean sources suggested that the majority of the unit had been involved in the civil war, making them at least in their late 30s and 40s. Most soldiers were at a stage in life where they were married and had children, some even grandchildren. This involved family obligations and stresses that soldiers brought with them on deployment.

For most soldiers we spoke with, being a husband and father was only part of their family responsibilities as most were also the main breadwinner for much wider extended families. For example, British military advisors noted that the average RSLAF soldier supports ten people on his/her salary.³² For soldiers assigned to the AMISOM mission, the experience was a significant way to better provide for families given the supplemental pay for peacekeeping is much higher than their regular salary. In Sierra Leone, the lowest ranks of the military stand to make roughly eight times their regular monthly salary while on peacekeeping deployments.³³ While

³⁰UNDP Human Development Report 2020.

³¹For a detailed discussion about Sierra Leone's military downsizing process and financial constraints related to recruitment see Nelson-Williams, "Restructuring the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces." Observations of higher age average within RSLAF were also noted in Author 1 interview with British military advisor, November 2016.

³²Albrecht and Jackson, "A New Government, a New Beginning," 81.

³³LEOBATT1 was paid 828 USD per month while on deployment, in addition to their regular monthly salary. According to the interviews with British advisors, privates in RSLAF at the time made 750,000 leones (120 USD, conversion based on 2016 rates). As all LEOBATT1 peacekeepers were paid the same supplemental rate, those at the lowest rank had the highest increase compared to

supplemental peacekeeping pay provided a significant financial boost for families, soldiers also explained the high amount of stress that came with having financial and care responsibilities for extended families. These family structures and extended obligations are generally not accounted for in existing studies of military families.

The pattern of soldiers often staying in the armed forces for the maximum amount allowed may also shape the way the command structure views the role of families. In Sierra Leone, there is little concern about soldiers leaving to pursue a career elsewhere and therefore the concept of family support as a retention tool is less applicable. This does not suggest that the command does not care about families but that the need to address family stresses is likely not seen as an immediate 'threat' to the stability of the force.

The weak economic conditions of some peacekeeping troop-contributing countries like Sierra Leone mean that these deployments are often done on a 'shoestring budget'. As a result of financial constraints, Sierra Leone was not able to meet the mission's basic equipment standards.³⁴ Ultimately, much of the equipment was donated and the country deployed on a 'dry lease' agreement, which meant they relied on logistical support from partner countries.³⁵ By deploying 'on the cheap' more advanced equipment such as counter-IED devices, helicopters, or night vision devices were not available to LEOBATT1.³⁶ This placed LEOBATT1 soldiers in situations of increased danger but also challenged their ability to adapt to conditions on the deployment sites. Later sections will demonstrate how these constraints affected support for families and at times the ability for soldiers to communicate with families back home. The limited resources available for peacekeeping also meant that tough spending decisions had to be made and family well-being may have been lower on the list than other issues more directly linked to the mission mandate and protection of its contingent.

A 'New' Military with Peacekeeping Roles

By the end of Sierra Leone's civil war (1991-2002) the country's army had effectively disintegrated and the reputation of the forces was abysmal.³⁷ Therefore, 'a pressing requirement for post-war reconstruction was to transform the army into a stabilising force that could protect the country's territorial integrity and, most importantly, to establish for it a clear and meaningful role outside of politics'.³⁸ This involved an extensive (re)training,

their regular salary. Significant changes to the value of the leone in recent years means the percentage of increase compared to regular salaries may fluctuate along with exchange rates.

³⁴Williams, "Joining AMISOM," 182.

³⁵Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia*, 165.

³⁶Albrecht and Haenlein, "Sierra Leone's Post-Conflict Peacekeepers," 28.

³⁷Gbla, "Security Sector Reform Under International Tutelage."

³⁸Albrecht and Haenlein, "Sierra Leone's Post-Conflict Peacekeepers," 28

advisory, and institutional building programme led primarily by the UK through its International Military Advisory and Training Team (IMATT) programme between 2000 and 2013.³⁹ The process overlapped with the presence of both ECOWAS and UN peacekeeping missions aimed to help bring the war to an end and assist in the post-conflict reconstruction.⁴⁰

There is no doubt that RSLAF has been significantly reformed since the end of the war and public polling data has found it in recent years to be among the most trusted institutions in the state.⁴¹ The process clearly instilled that the armed forces should be apolitical and externally focused but with few external threats it became less clear what the newly recreated force should focus on. Several years into the IMATT programme, attention began to focus on international peacekeeping as a potential mission and training began to prepare for deployments on peace support operations (PSO).⁴² Peace support operations were viewed by Sierra Leone and its foreign advisors as having multiple advantages for the armed forces. At the more abstract level, it was seen as a way to improve the image of the military and a way to pay-back the international community for its contribution to peacekeeping in Sierra Leone during the civil war.⁴³ At the more practical level, PSO missions were seen to have the potential to enhance operational capabilities, help acquire equipment, and provide greater income to individual troops as well as the organization as a whole. The peacekeeping goal took on 'existential significance' by providing a focus for the army that was away from domestic politics in hopes of reducing the potential threat to stability that the armed forces had posed in the past.⁴⁴

Although Sierra Leone had experience on peacekeeping in early independence years and in regional peace support operations in the 1990s, its first post-war peacekeeping troop contribution began when it sent a company to the UNAMID mission in 2009.⁴⁵ This was a significant step but the country aimed for larger contributions and it received this opportunity when it was invited to take part in the AMISOM mission in Somalia. Following pre-deployment training, carried out with the assistance of the UK and US, LEOBATT1 deployed to Somalia in April of 2013.⁴⁶ RSLAF planned for this to be a regular rotation of troops and immediately selected and began training another battalion

³⁹Haenlein and Godwin, "Containing Ebola," 6. IMATT was then replaced with a much smaller International Security Advisory Team (ISAT).

⁴⁰Olonisakin, *Peacekeeping in Sierra Leone*.

⁴¹Afrobarometer, "Corruption, Trust, and Performance of Political Leaders."

⁴²Albrecht and Haenlein, "Sierra Leone's Post-Conflict Peacekeepers," 29.

⁴³*Ibid.*

⁴⁴Albrecht and Haenlein, "Dissolving the Internal-External Divide," 113.

⁴⁵Albrecht and Jackson, "A New Government, a New Beginning," 78.

⁴⁶Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia*, 165.

for deployment, yet as will be explained, exceptional circumstances prohibited the deployment of LEOBATT2.

RSLAF in Somalia

The AMISOM mission, which is operated by the African Union, was first deployed in 2007 to Mogadishu with an initial force of around 1,600 troops which by 2015 had expanded to 22,000.⁴⁷ It has three broad strategic objectives: ‘reducing the threat posed by al-Shabaab and other armed opposition groups; providing security to enable Somalia’s political processes and efforts at reconciliation; and handing over its security responsibilities to the Somali security forces’.⁴⁸ For the majority of AMISOM troops, including the Sierra Leonean contingent, the first objective—reducing the threat of al-Shabaab was the main role. This has consistently proved to be a difficult and dangerous task. Al-Shabaab has actively and increasingly focused their attacks on AMISOM, with the group carrying out an attack on AMISOM forces on average of at least once per day.⁴⁹ Their attacks have focused most heavily on AMISOM troops in Sectors 1, 2, and 3.⁵⁰

The Sierra Leonean contingent was based in Sector 2 (South-Central Somalia) and spread across three locations: Tabda, Dhobley, and Kismaayo. LEOBATT1’s headquarter was in Tabda, which they took over from the Kenyan contingent upon their arrival. Tabda is a remote location, roughly 50 miles from the Kenyan border, with only a small village nearby. While it is possible to travel the 40 miles by road to Dhobley, where other elements of the Sierra Leone contingent were based alongside Kenyan troops, the road became impassable during the rainy season. Nearly all interviewees agreed that those based at the LEOBATT HQ in Tabda had the most challenging conditions.

While RSLAF had planned for a 12-month deployment with troop rotation in spring of 2014, the timing overlapped with Sierra Leone’s first reported Ebola cases in March of 2014. International concern over the spread of the highly fatal disease led to several different plans to safely rotate the Sierra Leone contingent, yet disagreements and unease with the rotation kept LEOBATT1 deployed in Somalia and in limbo about their return date. In August of 2014, the president of Somalia announced that no new Sierra Leonean troops were to be deployed to Somalia, putting an end to the debate about how to safely rotate troops during the epidemic.⁵¹

⁴⁷Williams, “AMISOM under Review,” 40.

⁴⁸Williams et al. “Assessing the Effectiveness of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM),” 12.

⁴⁹Ibid, 35.

⁵⁰Ibid, 35.

⁵¹Albrecht and Haenlein, “Sierra Leone’s Post-Conflict Peacekeepers,” 31.

LEOBATT 1 returned to Sierra Leone in late January 2015, thus ending its peacekeeping involvement in Somalia after only one deployment. The soldiers that were part of LEOBATT1 stayed in theatre for 22 months, an exceptionally long mission for contemporary peacekeeping operations. While the country was declared Ebola-free in late 2015, other complications, primarily issues of equipment, have prohibited Sierra Leone from participating in any large-scale peacekeeping since its return from AMISOM in 2015.⁵²

It is difficult to measure the impact of one deployment within a mission spanning many years and tens of thousands of peacekeepers. Still, the LEOBATT1 deployment was generally seen as a success, with the contingent's performance praised domestically and internationally. Nearly all interviewees expressed pride in LEOBATT1's role in Somalia. As Brig. Gen. Conteh, the LEOBATT1 commander, noted 'I consider it a success, there is no war without casualties but we only had one killed in actions and four others died of natural causes'.⁵³ Although proud of their role in LEOBATT1, they were not shy about discussing the challenges and areas that could use improvement in the future, as the following section explains.

Hardship Conditions and Waning Troop Morale

LEOBATT1's experience on the AMISOM mission would be considered a 'hardship tour' by nearly any modern definition. One issue that was discussed by most interviewees was the intense attacks they often came under from Al-Shabaab. LEOBATT1 regularly endured ambushes while on patrol, improvised explosive devices, and night attacks (the latter especially in Tabda).⁵⁴ While there has been limited research on the psychological effects of warfare in the Somalia context, similar patterns of asymmetric warfare in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan have shown high stress related to this type of combat. For example, the inability to identify the enemy and the use of improvised explosive devices create constant stress for soldiers in these environments.⁵⁵ Limitations on equipment as discussed earlier likely only increased the pressure for the Sierra Leone contingent.

While the Sierra Leonean soldiers discussed the difficulty of the attacks, their ability to defend themselves was also a significant source of pride. Interviewees regularly compared their more aggressive stance to what they viewed as a more passive approach by the Kenyan contingent (the contingent they engaged with the most). In some ways the regular statements about how the Sierra Leoneans outperformed the Kenyan contingent might be seen as

⁵² Author interviews with members of the Peacekeeping Directorate.

⁵³ Authors 1 and 2 joint interview, 24 February 2020; Conteh was a Brigadier General at the time of the interview in 2020 but a LtCol when he led LEOBATT1.

⁵⁴ Authors 1 and 2 interviews with LEOBATT1 members and leadership.

⁵⁵ De Angelis and Segal, "Transitions in the Military and the Family," 27.

masculine boasting. However, there is also a contextual explanation for these observations. The majority of the LEOBATT1 contingent had been a combatant during the Sierra Leone civil war. For many interviewees from LEOBATT1, they saw their past combat experience as a unique contribution to the AMISOM mission and one they expressed pride about. Further, soldiers were very complimentary of the training they received prior to the mission and attributed it to their ability to successfully handle the attacks.

Another issue that contributed to the hardship of the missions, particularly for those based at Tabda was the living conditions. Members of LEOBATT1 described their surprise at arriving to Tabda to find that 'there was no proper houses, we had to dig trenches and sleep in the ground because of the mortars'.⁵⁶ A Private also built on the recurrent theme of the living conditions when he explained 'We had to build our own bunkers. We slept in trenches, four each in a trench. Our defences were made of sandbags, but still Al Shabaab never entered our camp'.⁵⁷ Others also noted that trench living involved scorpions, snakes, flooding, and a situation where soldiers were trapped when a trench collapsed.

Interviews with leadership in the Peacekeeping Directorate, leadership from the mission, members of the international training mission, and after-actions reports shown to the researchers demonstrate that the issues of combat experiences and hardship living conditions were well-documented internally and plans were drawn up to address them. For example, leadership from LEOBATT1 provided the Ministry of Defense with a list of 40 recommendations to improve future peacekeeping deployments based on the AMISOM experience. The vast majority of these involve logistics or specific skills suggested for inclusion in future pre-deployment training.⁵⁸

The recommendations were not only meant to improve the operational capabilities of future peacekeeping contingents. They are also aimed to avoid a repeat of the serious morale problems that had developed within the LEOBATT1 contingent and intensified when the deployment was extended multiple times. Soldiers and officers alike described growing tensions which at times grew to the point of violent mutiny. A Captain from the LEOBATT1 missions described the decision to extend the mission as 'the worst news I had to report' due to the negative reactions it invoked in the troops.⁵⁹ In one official document shown to the researchers, it explains 'the level of discipline dropped amongst troops when the outbreak of Ebola Virus Diseases caused delay in rotation of troops'. It goes on to describe a series of 'ugly situations', which included a soldier firing a weapon at his colleagues, threats against officers by soldiers in the unit

⁵⁶ Author 1 interview with LCpl, 23 November 2016.

⁵⁷ Author 1 interview with Private, 7 November 2016.

⁵⁸ After Action Reports viewed by authors.

⁵⁹ Author 1 interview with Captain, 11 November 2016.

and attempts to incite others to revolt against leadership and detach from the unit.⁶⁰ The unit Imam remembers

it created panic among us, when they [fellow soldiers] opened fire in camp. And they were abusing commanders. I tried to talk to them as a religious person. I gave them relevant religious quotes ... ultimately they were overpowered and then disarmed ... I told them they would get a bad reputation but by then some people were just tired of war.⁶¹

Multiple LEOBATT1 interviewees recounted stories of these incidents but they were often told to us with what appeared to be some hesitation. It is likely that they did not want these actions to detract from what they viewed as an overall successful mission. One of the most frank accounts of the acts of indiscipline came from Brig. Gen. Conteh who viewed it as a serious command challenge and noted that 11 soldiers from LEOBATT1 were dismissed from the army for failing to follow orders and attempting to incite others to revolt. For Conteh, these acts of indiscipline were especially serious on international missions because ‘they challenged our good image’.⁶² These incidents involved a small minority of the LEOBATT1 contingent yet still it proved worrisome and stressful for unit leadership and the individuals at the scenes at the time.

Family Matters

The dwindling morale as described above was not only due to the immediate conditions of the mission, it was also fed by stress about families back home. In our extensive and open-ended conversations with members of the LEOBATT1 contingent about their experience on the mission, issues of family life came up over and over again. Some described the family ‘nostalgia’ as the hardest part of the mission. For example, a Lance Corporal discussing challenges of life on the AMISOM mission explained ‘The worst was the home stress’. Likewise, officers described low morale related to family issues was an ongoing challenge to leadership. As a Lieutenant Colonel explained ‘welfare back here [Sierra Leone] is always on their minds ... these welfare issues can drain their minds’.⁶³

While LEOBATT interviewees described challenges to family life while on deployment, they also noted that family considerations were not completely absent from the official pre-deployment process. Soldiers can sign documents which allow specified members of their families to collect their salaries and rations while they are on deployment.⁶⁴ An officer on the mission

⁶⁰After Action Reports viewed by authors.

⁶¹Author 1 interview with military Imam, 29 November 2016.

⁶²Authors 1 and 2 joint interview, 24 February 2020.

⁶³Authors 1 and 2 joint interview with Lieutenant Colonel, 26 February 2020.

⁶⁴In RSLAF military personnel are provided rations of rice in addition to their salaries.

estimated that 90% of the contingent used this option to provide for their family while away. There were also ‘welfare arrangements’ in place which helped coordinate funds to families of deployed soldiers in the case of an emergency. These financial matters are run through the Office of Financial Allotment within the MOD and according to most, they worked smoothly. Yet, there were other matters that arose while on deployments.

The family-related challenges that interviewees described generally fit into three broad categories: inability to communicate with family, miscommunication, and the inability to take care of families both physically and emotionally.

Communication Gaps

The most common source of family-related frustration was the inconsistency in their ability to phone home. Soldiers are allowed to have personal cell phones on deployment, including smartphones, and many did. Smartphones allowed soldiers to have video chats, usually through WhatsApp, and see their family members. However, while smartphones are extremely widespread in many parts of the world, this was not the case in Sierra Leone during the LEOBATT1 deployment. During that period it was estimated that only 13% of Sierra Leoneans had access to phones that allowed social media apps such as WhatsApp.⁶⁵ For soldiers without a cell phone, or who had family members without a phone, the MOD established a ‘welfare centre’ in which families could come at set times to use Skype to speak with their deployed family member. However, this option was not used by many due to the rather cumbersome process and location. The option was only available in Freetown, while many of the families lived far from the capital. One interviewee explained that this was the only option he had to see his family but they only used it twice during the 22-month deployment because his family lived roughly 115 miles from the welfare centre.

For soldiers with a cell phone, it was a lifeline to their families back home and many described the conversations as an important part of their daily or weekly routines. For example, when asked about what a typical day on deployment looked like, a Corporal explained ‘I wake up and call or message my wife, afterwards I do my prayers, that is how I started my days’.⁶⁶ Others described looking forward to set weekly times that they had with family back home to call. Still others reminisced about cute things their kids said or asked on video chats while they were deployed.

⁶⁵Wittels and Maybanks, “Communication in Sierra Leone.”

⁶⁶Interview 1 with Corporal, 22 November 2016.

Through recalling these often vivid memories years later, it was clear calls home were central to life on the deployment.

Yet maintaining the communication routine was difficult for several reasons. Without set monthly data/minute plans or local bank accounts, soldiers had to regularly purchase their phone credit with cash in local villages. However, in the remote deployment locations of Tabda and Dhobley these trips could only be done with a convoy and during some periods these trips were irregular. Of course, to purchase phone credit soldiers needed money. For most of the deployment that was not a problem as soldiers receive monthly stipends. The stipends are meant for purchases while on deployment and are separate from their salary, which is deposited in their bank accounts in Sierra Leone. However, complications at the beginning of the mission left some soldiers without their stipend for 3–4 months. One of these complications was the unexpected need to construct defences and trenches at the Tabda base, in which the money sent from the Sierra Leone Ministry of Defense for stipends was diverted to those expenses. Many soldiers noted this period as a particularly difficult time as they were unable to establish routine communication back home.

Following the initial setbacks, soldiers with cell phones established regular contact some explaining that they spent most of their stipends on data. Yet, in the second half of the deployment soldiers explained that the network in the area went out for over a month. As one Corporal explained

I had talked to my family every day for 6–8 months and it was fine but then they [Al-Shabaab] cut us and for a month they controlled it. My family was very worried, they thought something happened that something went wrong with us.⁶⁷

Many others described this period in particular and an overall frustration at the ‘bad network’ especially in Tabda. Others also attributed it to Al Shabaab. For example, one Sergeant noted ‘Al Shabaab used to drop the phone lines, they controlled the network and could shut it down when they wanted’.⁶⁸ Whether Al Shabaab was responsible for the mobile data blackout is uncertain but the timing does match with a period in which the group forced the telecommunication provider Hormuud to switch off its mobile internet service.⁶⁹

While specific circumstances drove long gaps in the ability to communicate with family back home for the LEOBATT1 contingent, similar problems have been noted in deployments by other African contingents. For example, during South Africa’s deployment to Darfur a breakdown of satellite phones

⁶⁷Interview 1 with Corporal, 22 February 2020.

⁶⁸Interview 1 with Sergeant, 22 February 2020.

⁶⁹Open Net Africa, “Somalia Powerless to Stop.”

led to two months of ‘no communication’.⁷⁰ Regardless of the exact reason, these interruptions, especially when for long periods create stress and anxiety for soldiers and their families. None of the Sierra Leonean interviewees noted any official process in place to inform families back home that the communication gaps were technological rather than the result of an attack on the unit or base.

Miscommunication

For the vast majority of soldiers the worries of families that the communication gaps signalled bad news were false alarms. Yet, for several soldiers who were medically evacuated miscommunication between military officials in Sierra Leone and their families was a source of dissatisfaction. For example, a soldier from LEOBATT1 had to be medically evacuated for a health reason late in the deployment timeframe. He praised the foreign medical attention he received, which included hospitalization in two different countries, and believed had it not been for the high-quality facilities he would have died. Still, there was frustration that the command did not inform his family about what was going on. Rather, false rumours reached his family about his condition. He noted ‘when I left for medical people called my family and told them I had died’. Here is referring to members of his unit who told their families and contacts back in Sierra Leone, which later reached his family.

Luckily incidents like these were rare on the AMISOM mission as there were few casualties. However, in discussions with Sierra Leonean soldiers who had taken part in the UNAMID mission in Sudan, a similar pattern of miscommunication around injuries and fatalities occurred. For example, a Sergeant on the mission discussed in detail being attacked by gunmen in an ambush. He sustained two gunshot wounds and was hospitalized for two and a half months before returning to Sierra Leone. This was a traumatic experience but ultimately the Sergeant felt fortunate as a colleague he was with during the ambush did not survive the attack. He explained that due to the severity of his injuries he was initially ‘not allowed to call back home’ and his understanding is that there was much confusion back in Sierra Leone about this condition. He explained ‘there were many stories going around ... at first even the command thought I had died ... people told my family I was dead ... many people began to come to my house ... they had come to sympathize with my wife’. When he was able to call home from the hospital he first called his wife who was very confused as she had received news from his colleagues that he had passed away. Ultimately, even after their phone conversation, she did not believe it was him

⁷⁰Heinecken and Ferreira “Fighting for Peace,” 55.

due to the pervasive rumours. He went on to describe the surreal experience when he ‘had to call all my relatives, one by one to convince them I am {interviewees name} and I am alive’.⁷¹

Fortunately, the number of injuries and fatalities during the missions that Sierra Leone has participated in has been low. Still, of this small sample, several expressed frustration about a lack of clear procedures for informing family members, creating great stress for families and sense of unease from soldiers about the uncertainty of the process for injuries.

Wellbeing Worries

Beyond the issues of (mis)communication, was a general sense of worry about family back home and frustration at not being able to provide support to them while away. Many interviewees discussed the difficulties their families had with the news of their deployment. For example,

My wife was crying on hearing news of my deployment because she knew I was going into a dangerous war zone. Somalia is always on the news regarding frequent Al Shabaab fatal attacks, killing both civilians and military peacekeepers. I finally consoled and convinced them that I will be ok as a trained soldier and that they should continue to pray for me for a safe return.⁷²

A Major similarly noted ‘I have a wife and 2 kids, they are at Makeni barracks They were worried because it is a war situation, my wife is always listening to the news, I tell her this is a military job and I have to go’.⁷³

The concern about family wellbeing was a two-way street with soldiers also discussing their worries for their family back in Sierra Leone. While Sierra Leone is a stable country with relatively low crime rates, there are significant everyday risks that families endure. In particular, the country has a very underdeveloped healthcare system, which is reflected in its life expectancy of only 55 years.⁷⁴ Relatedly, the country has the highest maternal mortality rate in the world.⁷⁵ These tragic figures were represented in our discussions with returned peacekeepers. Several soldiers we spoke to lost infant and young children while on deployment and one lost his wife. Others spoke of the deaths of extended family members while they were away. For those that lost a loved one while deployed, they were unable to return home to attend to their families. Understandably, those that lost close family members while on the deployment had the most negative views of the mission of the interviewees we spoke to.

⁷¹ Author 1 interview with Sergeant, 24 February 2020.

⁷² Author 2 interview with Corporal, 25 February 2020.

⁷³ Author 1 interview with Major, 21 February 2020.

⁷⁴ UNDP Human Development Report 2020.

⁷⁵ UNICEF, “Making Strides to Improve Maternal Health.”

The ongoing concerns that soldiers had for the welfare of their families were exacerbated by the Ebola pandemic. Soldiers described feeling helpless as they continually listened to international news about how the deadly disease was affecting their home country. For instance, a Lance Corporal discussing challenges of life on the AMISOM mission explained ‘We were worried about our families and Ebola, and our families were worried. Really the worst part was the home stress, and all you can do is call’.⁷⁶ As this soldier highlights, fears about the Ebola risks to their families only intensified the desire for regular communication and created further frustration around communication challenges. There does not appear to have been any additional support given to families of deployed soldiers during the Ebola pandemic, likely because leadership in Sierra Leone were focused on the rapidly escalating crisis within its borders. Without the ability to physically assist their families during the Ebola crisis some soldiers solicited the help of neighbours or relatives to regularly check in on their families (from afar due to the contagiousness of the disease), while others attempted to arrange for their families to move to the houses of extended family in areas deemed safer. Yet, attempting these family arrangements from afar with often limited cell phone coverage seemed to heighten stress levels amongst the troops.

Officers within the unit described the difficulties of commanding troops during this period and often linked the low morale to family stress. Officers and enlisted soldiers alike also felt that family-related stress was a significant factor in the acts of indiscipline seen in a minority of soldiers as described in the previous section. As one Captain explained

You know we were briefed that it would be a year. We have families and we set things up for being away a year, most families were not ready for longer. Many people became very disgruntled, there were a lot who challenged it – whatever happens they cast blame on you (officers). You can’t dodge it, I had to talk with them, explain that it is a disease, it cannot be helped, we have to be patient. But many became tired and wouldn’t listen.⁷⁷

The viewpoint of this officer was confirmed by enlisted soldiers who also discussed the low morale and how family stress was a big part of it. For example, a Corporal explained

They told us we are here for one year but unexpectedly we have to stay ... AU extended us by 90 days, then because of the seriousness six months, then up to 22 months. Most colleagues become frown, we talk, say let’s be patient, it is not the fault of our commanders but even myself I was so disgruntled. I was gone a for long time, I hadn’t seen my family and all the time being attacked. We had

⁷⁶Author 1 interview with Lance Corporal, 6 May 2016.

⁷⁷Author 1 interview with Captain, 23 November 2016.

to have patience but some of us were mad because we thought they should have prepared earlier for Ebola.⁷⁸

Another Corporal noted that

when the group was extended people were getting a lot of stressed calls from home, things like people say your wife is pregnant with someone else, your son is sick, when this happens you will be confused, constantly thinking thinking thinking -officers tried to talk to us, tell us to be patient but it was hard.⁷⁹

While there was frustration about not being able to directly assist families, especially during the Ebola outbreak, most noted that their participation was the best way they could help their families in the long-run. Nearly all interviewees explained that they earned significantly more while deployed on peacekeeping missions and these financial gains would benefit their families. It allowed soldiers to buy land, build houses, provide start-up costs for small-scale businesses for their wives and send their children to better schools. Therefore, many saw the family stress related to the deployment as a sacrifice for what they hoped would be long-term betterment. Still, the hope for a better future had its limits in curing the everyday family stress many were grappling with. As one Lance Corporal explained 'never mind the money, I just wanted to get back. My family did not know if I would die there, my family suffered. I feels so good to be back'.⁸⁰

Returning Home

In interviewing soldiers about their experiences on AMISOM, the return home was often the most animated part of the discussion. They described the sense of relief at returning to Sierra Leone, tearful reunions, celebrations held, and gifts they brought back for their family. Yet, many of those expecting some significant downtime after 22 months in Somalia came to find out they would have to wait longer. The Ebola pandemic was still ongoing, proving especially difficult to bring an end to in the northern parts of the country. The Ministry of Defense was a leading player in the response efforts and the LEOBATT1 contingent was viewed to be amongst the most capable units due to their training and deployment experience. Therefore, many of the LEOBATT1 members soon redeployed domestically as part of the Ebola response, specifically as part of 'Operation Northern Push', a military-led mission to eradicate Ebola in the north of the country. Many of the same soldiers who told us stories about countering attacks by Al Shabaab in Somalia also described their experience just months later with conducting roadside temperature checks and assisting with quarantines in Sierra

⁷⁸Author 1 interview with Corporal, 22 November 2016.

⁷⁹Author 1 interview with Corporal, 7 November 2016.

⁸⁰Author 1 interview with Lance Corporal, 21 November 2016.

Leone. Of course, this too came with a high personal risk and in some cases required further time away from families.

Brig. Gen. Conteh explained that there was a plan to ‘detraumatize’ the LEOBATT1 contingent through group discussions and debriefings following their return to Sierra Leone. But this had to be cancelled due to prohibition of group gathering due to the Ebola situation and instead individual officers were asked to speak to troops. Yet, there is no indication that there was any formal mental health screening or related support following the deployment. Interviewees, including senior officers, initiated discussions about family stress and were forthcoming about the challenges it caused for leaders and the deployment overall. Yet, in the after-action reports shown to us and official recommendations made for future missions there were no mention of family issues. This suggests that family-related stress was seen as outside the scope of official military matters.

At the time of the deployment extension due to Ebola, the situation may have seemed an exceptional circumstance. The Ebola epidemic was extreme and relatively rare. However, deployment extensions due to health crisis do not appear so extraordinary following the Covid-19 pandemic. The rotation of troops was suspended on many international missions, requiring troops to stay on deployment beyond the original timeframe.⁸¹ Therefore, the stressful situations experienced by the LEOBATT1 contingent following the Ebola situation may provide lessons learned for future unexpected rotation delays such as those related to Covid-19 or other future pandemics.

Conclusion

Military deployments involve complicated logistical, equipment, and training needs but also involve broader social consequences and challenges. Through a look at Sierra Leone’s first battalion-sized deployment abroad, we have highlighted the family-related stress experienced by the contingent members. While the place of families in deployments has been given increasing policy and academic attention in Western militaries, it remains an understudied area in African armed forces. We have shown that the family-related stress on deployment is not only an issue of family separation, it is entangled with the historic trajectories of the armed forces and the sending country’s socio-economic conditions. This article has shown how soldiers struggled with the broad family obligations at home and limited family support from the command. The latter is likely linked to a combination of financial resources constraints and the newness of the country’s participation in AMISOM in which oversights of challenges occurred.

⁸¹Institute for Security Studies, “COVID-19 Should Help Rethink Peace Support”; Wilén, “The Military in the Time of COVID-19.”

By focusing on the perspectives of the LEOBATT1 contingent we have shown the central place family-related stress can play in peacekeeping deployments. Soldiers consistently discussed it as a key challenge to their time on deployment, with some saying it was the hardest aspect. The micro perspective of family stress and struggles to manage family relations while deployed is often an individual matter. Yet, we also demonstrated how these personal matters grew into wider morale issues when compounded with other stressful aspects of the deployment. Ultimately, the low morale culminated into a series of acts of indiscipline within the unit, challenging leadership, cohesion, and safety.

While our focus has been on Sierra Leone, we anticipate the challenges experienced in this case are applicable to other similar contexts, especially those with significant financial constraints. This is especially the case on peace enforcement missions in which remote locations, infrastructural limitations, and the stress of combat can build on communication challenges and contribute to family-related stress. These findings help contribute to calls to further interrogate the effects on soldiers participation in increasingly 'robust' peace support operations.⁸²

This exploratory study also helps highlight other areas that require further research. Overall, little is known about the types of support structures offered by states to African soldiers and their families while at home or deployed abroad. While our study focuses on the view of the deployed soldier, the perspective of spouses or other family members could help provide additional viewpoints of how families adapt to deployment and how it shapes family life in the short and long term. Many peace support operations involve an increasing number of female soldiers and research on the reintegration of peacekeepers in Africa has shown important gendered differences in this process.⁸³ Further research on family-related stress on deployments should also take into account the experiences of women on these missions to account for gendered obligations and variations in experiences across gender. The focus on stress speaks to the wider issue of mental health and the way it is affected by deployments and combat experiences. While we highlight conditions of stress, we were not in the position to link these experiences to more long-term mental health or formal diagnoses such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A limited number of studies and journalistic reporting on the topic have shown limited screening, support, or treatment available for mental health issues within the African armed forces.⁸⁴ Yet, this important issue has remained understudied.

⁸²Wilén and Heinecken, "Peacekeeping Deployment Abroad and the Self-Perceptions."

⁸³Heinecken and Wilén, "No Place Like Home?"

⁸⁴Mwenja, "Suffering from PTSD is Enough Punishment."

Our research can help provide a better understanding of the types of institutional deployment support that would be pertinent to the needs of soldiers in Africa. Incorporating military family dynamics into the discussion of peacekeeping expands analysis of costs and benefits of countries contributing troops to international peace operations. Including families into analysis about African militaries also provides a more holistic view of these organizations which have long been central to African states and are increasingly crucial to international peace support operations.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council, UK under grant ES/S00579X/1.

Notes on contributors

Dr Maggie Dwyer is a Lecturer in the School of Social and Political Science at University of Edinburgh. She is also a Global Fellow at the Peace Research Institute Oslo. Her research is focused on security, politics, and development, primarily in West Africa. She is leading the Economic and Social Research Council funded project ‘Return from Peacekeeping: Mission Effects on Veterans, States, and Communities.’

Dr. Osman Gbla is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone and the founder of the Centre for Development and Security Analysis (CEDSA). He is a leading expert on security sector reform and hybrid security governance, conflicts and peace building in West Africa.

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