

Armed Forces of Liberia Take up Action on Women, Peace and Security Agenda

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Abstract

In July 2025, we, Dr. Priscilla Torres and Dr. Roya Izadi, interviewed leadership and key decision-makers in the AFL. We asked questions about the current status of women in the armed forces, as well as any improvements that have been made in the areas that were recommended for improvement in the MOWIP assessment. Overall, the AFL has made significant improvements to the areas that were noted for improvement in the 2022 MOWIP assessment. While the AFL has explicitly taken on many of the recommendations that came out of the MOWIP assessment, it remains difficult to implement the recommendations due to a lack of access to vehicles (mobility) and funding to implement such efforts. While the ESLIE initiative and the MOWIP assessment have been critical in helping the AFL identify areas for improvement, the next step required of the international community is to support the infrastructure and resource mobilization required for such changes to be implemented throughout the AFL.



Introduction

Since the publication of the ELSIE Measuring Opportunities for Women in Peace Operations (MOWIP) report for the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) in 2022, the AFL has made large strides in improving the situation of women and men. The report noted first and foremost that there are very few women in the AFL to begin with. This led to the redeployment of women as the AFL tries to meet gender recommendations from the United Nations. Meanwhile male members of the AFL, who make up the vast majority of the force, have very few opportunities to deploy to UN Peace Operations. A second area of concern are issues of retainment. Barrack conditions, consistency of pay and access to benefits were all noted as issues facing both men and women in the AFL that pose negative implications for retention. Lastly, the report found that members of the AFL who previously deployed to UN peace operations did not feel adequately trained for deployment. Financial hardship post deployment was also noted as a pervasive issue facing members of the AFL.

Overall, the AFL has made significant improvements to the areas that were noted for improvement in the 2022 MOWIP assessment. Notably, the AFL has taken on efforts to recruit more women through their pre-recruitment training program, specifically for female recruits. This effort has resulted in an increase from approximately 30 female members of the AFL in 2022 to between 147 and 152 female members of the AFL. The AFL has

also curbed issues of delayed and inconsistent payment and is currently undergoing a barrack renovation project. Improvements to healthcare have been noted as well, especially with the construction of the 14th Military Hospital—the first of its kind in Liberia. Efforts have also been made to spread awareness about gender policies that the AFL has.

The sections that follow highlight some of the key improvements and innovations that have been made by the AFL since the MOWIP assessment was published in 2022. While there is a significant amount of political will among leadership in the AFL to continue to address issues noted in the MOWIP assessment, time and time again, leadership noted significant constraints in their ability to fully implement the policy recommendations in the MOWIP. The primary constraints noted are a lack of mobility (access to vehicles, especially those that can reach remote areas of the country) and a lack of funding. The authors also believe it is important to note that concerns about these tools needed for implementation were expressed at a time when historic partners of the AFL, such as the United States, have explicitly cut off distinct, yet related programs such as USAID, and have expressed an interest in retreating from other foreign engagements, which could very well one day extend to cuts in engagement with the AFL.

Main Findings from MOWIP Assessment and Recommendations

According to the Armed Forces of Liberia's MOWIP report (2022), the three

largest barriers to the meaningful inclusion of women in United Nations peace operations were deployment selection (Issue Area 3), peace operation infrastructure (Issue Area 5) and social exclusion (Issue Area 10). The report also highlighted a broader, fundamental issue that hindered women's inclusion in peacekeeping operations: there are very few women in the AFL to begin with.

In 2022, approximately 2000 soldiers served within the AFL, including about 80 women.¹ Many barriers that women face to meaningful inclusion in the AFL also affect men. Consequently, the report states that many of the issues that the AFL encounters represent general retainment challenges for both male and female soldiers alike.

Participants in the survey highlighted that they lacked access to adequate equipment, services (especially childcare) and infrastructure. They noted that these factors were missing domestically in Liberia and in mission. Many of the AFL members who had not deployed noted that they did not believe that they were well trained enough to pass testing for deployment. They also felt that they did not possess the computer and driving skills necessary for deployment. Among female members of the AFL who had deployed, they were worried about backlash if they were chosen to participate in a mission. Many of the women noted that men tend to believe that

they were unfairly chosen to deploy to UN peace operations. The internal dissemination of key information such as the criteria for UN peacekeeping deployment and such as frequency of pay were noted as challenges for the AFL. Women were also afraid of harassment by male colleagues, while men were afraid of being accused of harassment by their female colleagues. The fear of harassment and the fear of being accused of harassment contributed to large divisions between male and female members of the AFL in which they did not engage with each other much outside of formal work activities.

The MOWIP report made several recommendations to help the AFL overcome these barriers. First, the report recommended that the conditions in-country be improved, including but not limited to barrack quality, access to childcare and increased and consistent payment. The report noted that particular attention should be paid to single, unmarried mothers who work in the AFL. At the time that the MOWIP report was written, there was a policy in place in which women could not receive maternity leave unless they were married. Second, it was recommended that infrastructure for deployment be improved. In particular, access to mental healthcare, especially for those who had been deployed, was highlighted as a key area for improvement. Equal access to contraceptives for men and women was also noted as a key area for improvement. Third, the report recommended increased training for members of the AFL so that when they are

¹ Based on the number of women included in the sample for the MOWIP Assessment, this seems to be an overestimate of the number of women who were in the AFL at the time.

deployed they can feel prepared in computer skills, driving and language training. Fourth, in order to help curb backlash against female AFL members who are deployed to peace operations, the report recommended that AFL leadership spread awareness about the skills that are needed in order for members, men and women alike, to deploy to UN peace operations. Additionally, the report recommended that opportunities for deployment be available to both men and women and that the AFL promote positive bonding between male and female members of the AFL. Fifth, the report recommended that financial literacy training be offered to members of the AFL pre and post deployment. The report also suggested that financial literacy training be made available to dependents of AFL members who manage the finances of deployed members while they are away. Following will be updates and assessments on each barrier.

Issue Areas	Recommendations	Accomplishments	Challenges Ahead
Eligible Pool	Clearly state the policies for deployment selection Provide information about professional networks to all soldiers Provide later batches with opportunities to do international training Identify best practices from current recruitment drive and replicate Institutionalize the pre-recruitment training Expedite the Military Maternity Uniform Provide more opportunities for in-service training	A pre-recruitment training program specifically designed for women was introduced to help bridge physical and academic gaps. International partners have praised the initiative, which helps maintain momentum and legitimacy. AFL has acted on recommendations regarding pregnancy and leave policies	Funding constraints Limited mobility, lack of vehicles to reach remote areas where potential recruits live Societal attitudes continue to discourage women from joining the armed forces Structural barriers Physical readiness Restrictive pregnancy and maternity leave policies Gaps in once women-centered career fields Continue outreach campaigns
Deployment Criteria	Provide clear guidelines about the requirements necessary for deployment Institutionalize the importance of gender sensitivity Institutionalize contact and kinetic skills as requirements for peacekeeping deployment Provide more in-service training on languages, written tests, driving, and computer skills Ensure that no one with disciplinary record is able to deploy	Whether married or not, a female soldier is entitled to maternity leave Awareness sessions have been conducted to inform both male and female soldiers of these changes Opening of the 14th Military Hospital has expanded access to care	
Deployment Selection	Institutionalize a testing cycle for deployment Provide an anonymous way for personnel to identify instances of abuse and mismanagement Provide stipends for those taking written tests Clearly state the policies for deployment selection Provide training for written tests for men and women, address testing issues, ensure that both men and women are able to take tests Ensure that whistleblowers are not punished.	Health insurance is now provided more consistently Beginnings of mental health programs, including counseling and awareness campaigns. soldiers know when to expect their salary In almost every county, some barracks are being rebuilt or repaired Renovated barracks near the airport, another in Saniquellie,	

Household Constraints	Childcare facilities and subsidies provided, particularly for single mothers Consider revising the leave policies: Leave policies are clearly stated and accessible Differentiated based on different types of leave Parental leave should be provided for both men and women Provide training on the leave policies, especially maternal leave Provide financial literacy program to personnel and their families before deployment Allow men to have flexible working hours so that they can engage in parenting activities Provide accommodations breastfeeding women Conduct a needs assessment and address concerns of single mothers in the AFL	and renovation is ongoing in Kakata and Grand Gedeh Progress has been made in expanding training opportunities Increase female participation A temporary arrangement has been introduced where complaints can be directed to designated focal points	
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Recruitment: Pre-Recruitment Training for Women

The 2022 MOWIP assessment identified recruitment as a central barrier to increasing women's representation in the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL). With fewer than 100 women in a force of nearly 2,000, the AFL struggled to meet gender inclusion goals. The report recommended creating targeted pathways for female recruits, including preparatory programs to address disparities in physical readiness and education levels.

Implementation and Achievements Since 2022

Since the report, the AFL has taken deliberate steps to implement these recommendations. A pre-recruitment training program specifically designed for women was introduced to help bridge physical and academic gaps. Leadership emphasized that this initiative has already yielded visible results, with female membership in the AFL rising to roughly 147 to 152 women in 2025, compared to fewer than 80 at the time of the assessment.

As one senior officer put it, "We realized that if we want more women, we cannot expect them to walk in with the same preparation as men. The pre-training gives them a fair chance." Another explained that the initiative has shifted perceptions internally: "Men are starting to see women not as a quota, but as trained colleagues." A gender focal point added, "Some of the women who came through pre-recruitment

are now among our strongest cadets. It proves the system works."

Several interviewees emphasized how the program has changed recruitment numbers and perceptions. One focal point noted, "The results came out very well. I happen to be one of those. I served as a gender focal person at the regional training camp." Another confirmed, "The total females that we have now, the percentage are 7.6. It used to be far below that. Looking at the total number of females we have now, 147 enlisted... So we need to step it up. The army is not that large." A communications officer explained the strategy behind the program: "We brought in now 150 females; we train them before the process to be able to get the number of females we wanted. Because if we just went straight to the process, we couldn't get them."

The AFL also uses publicity to encourage women. As one officer described, "We showcase females. For example, one of the females that we showcase is the Minister of Defense. So we use her picture to encourage more women to come. We also have talk shows, where we allow the female personnel to go on radio or television to express themselves so that the aim is to attract the females."

Challenges and Advantages

Despite these gains, challenges remain. Funding constraints and limited mobility (especially the lack of vehicles to reach remote areas where potential recruits live) have hindered broader implementation. Moreover, societal attitudes continue to discourage women from joining the armed

forces. One gender focal point noted: "Many families still believe the military is not for their daughters. Changing that mindset is harder than building a training camp." Another highlighted structural barriers: "Now that they don't have a safe space, the thing is to increase it, to make them feel more free or lively to do what they're supposed to do."

There are also gaps in career fields where women were once active. As one officer observed, "We used to have female mechanics, heavy duty mechanics, but they are not anymore. Most of them have left the army. So we are trying to see if we can bring females into that area."

Physical readiness remains a challenge. As one public affairs officer explained, "In Monrovia, most of the women are obese. So we gave them months to train at AFL expense, prepare them for the process. Without that, we could not get the number of females we wanted."

On the positive side, leadership described strong political will within the AFL to sustain and expand the program. They highlighted that international partners have praised the initiative, which helps maintain momentum and legitimacy. "UNMIL representatives told us this is exactly the type of innovation they want to see from Liberia," a commander noted. A gender focal point added, "Everything that a woman does, she does it to her best. That's what I know. And that's what the army has come to understand."

Way Forward

Going forward, AFL leaders stressed the need for sustained resources to expand pre-recruitment training, particularly in rural counties. Logistics, particularly access to vehicles capable of reaching rural counties, was noted as a key difficulty. Outreach campaigns to families and communities were also identified as a next step to counter lingering gender stereotypes. As one commander explained, "If we want to double the number of women, we need to start in the schools and in the homes, not just in the barracks."

Public affairs officers echoed this, pointing to the importance of visibility: "We start by putting up banners and flyers, using local radio stations, and social media to make the citizenry aware that AFL is about to recruit." Another commander emphasized the broader cultural shift required: "Before the pre-recruitment, females were roughly four percent. After the training, we are going to seven percent. But if we want to double the number, it is not only training, it is about changing how families and communities see women in uniform."

A personnel officer also connected this to workplace needs: "In my office, there is no female. So when the wives of soldiers come to discuss issues, I have to bring in another woman from the gender office. Otherwise they won't feel comfortable." This underlines that recruitment is not just about numbers, but also about ensuring women are present across offices and roles.

Policies on Pregnancy and Leave

The 2022 MOWIP report flagged

restrictive pregnancy and maternity leave policies as a barrier to women's meaningful participation in the AFL. At the time, female soldiers could not receive maternity leave unless they were married, creating inequities that discouraged recruitment and retention. The report recommended revising these policies to ensure that all women, regardless of marital status, could access maternity rights and to establish clearer procedures for leave and reintegration.

Implementation and Achievements Since 2022

Leadership interviews confirm that the AFL has acted on these recommendations. The discriminatory policy tying maternity leave to marital status has been revised. As one officer stated: "Now, whether married or not, a female soldier is entitled to maternity leave." Additionally, awareness sessions have been conducted to inform both male and female soldiers of these changes, though dissemination remains uneven.

Legal officers also tied this shift to broader international obligations. One explained, "The UN General Priority Strategic Policy for 2018 to 2028 says that in military contingents when they are deployed, the representation of women should be about 15 percent. So we had to make sure our policies allowed women to serve fully, including when they become mothers." One of the gender focal points noted that key female leaders within the AFL, who participated in the MOWIP, were instrumental in doing away with the

discriminatory maternity leave policy.

Challenges and Advantages

Implementation is not without hurdles. AFL leaders noted that resource constraints limit the ability to provide adequate replacement personnel when women take leave, which can burden already understaffed units. One commander explained: "The law may change, but without more manpower, the workload doesn't disappear." Social stigma also persists, with some male soldiers viewing maternity policies as favoritism. A female officer reflected: "The paper says one thing, but some colleagues still question whether women deserve the same benefits." Another added, "There are still men who think maternity leave is a vacation, not a right."

Legal officers also pointed to unresolved gaps in gender protection mechanisms: "We don't have a court martial in place, so rape and GBV cases are sent to the Ministry of Justice. We signed an MOU, but until we have our own system, these cases remain outside our control."

At the same time, the change is recognized as a milestone in gender inclusion. Leaders emphasized that the updated policy improves morale and helps normalize women's service. "Young recruits now see that the institution supports them as women, not just as soldiers," one gender focal point said.

Way Forward

Going forward, AFL leadership stressed

the need for better dissemination of information and training on the revised policy to ensure consistent implementation across units. They also highlighted the importance of additional recruitment to cover gaps when soldiers take leave. As one senior officer put it, "The policy is in place, but for it to work in practice we need both resources and a culture shift."

Healthcare: the 14th Military Hospital, Health Insurance and Mental Health

The MOWIP report identified weak access to healthcare, both domestically and in mission, as a barrier for soldiers. Access to mental health services was especially limited, and women lacked equal access to reproductive health services. The report recommended improving healthcare infrastructure, expanding insurance, and ensuring equal access to services.

Implementation and Achievements Since 2022

Since 2022, the AFL has made significant strides. The opening of the 14th Military Hospital has expanded access to care. One interviewee noted: "For the first time, soldiers and their families have a place that is ours, not dependent on civilian hospitals." Health insurance is also now provided more consistently, though gaps remain. Leaders also reported the beginnings of mental health programs, including counseling and awareness campaigns. "We now have one psychologist on staff, but one is not enough for the entire force," one officer cautioned.

Medical leadership explained the broader significance: "The hospital serves both soldiers and their dependents, but also the general population. Whether you are military or civilian, you can access services at the 14th Military Hospital. That is part of our civil-military relations and shows the army is a force for good." Another stressed its strategic location: "Along the airport road, accidents are frequent. Before, civilians had no nearby hospital. Now we fill that gap."

Challenges and Advantages

Despite progress, challenges remain in staffing and resourcing facilities. The hospital is seen as "a symbol of progress," but shortages of trained personnel and equipment limit its full effectiveness. Mental health support remains nascent, with stigma around seeking help. One officer admitted: "We talk about mental health, but soldiers still fear being labeled weak." A nurse added: "Women especially hesitate to speak about reproductive health needs in a military setting."

Other officers stressed that health outreach has long been an AFL role. "During Ebola, the AFL helped construct 20 Ebola treatment centers around Liberia. Under Operation White Shield, we enforced quarantines and checkpoints. Medical outreach is as important as the hospital itself."

Way Forward

Leaders emphasized the need for continuous investment, especially in mental health and reproductive health. They also

suggested partnerships with international organizations to expand capacity and training. Greater awareness among troops of the benefits now available was also recommended to maximize uptake.

Pay: Consistency and Amount

The 2022 MOWIP report found that inconsistent and delayed pay undermined morale and retention for both men and women. It recommended ensuring timely and fair pay as a foundation for professionalism and retention.

Implementation and Achievements Since 2022

Interviews confirmed major improvements. As one officer explained: "Before, payment was always late, sometimes months. Now, soldiers know when to expect their salary." Leadership emphasized that this change has stabilized families and reduced frustration.

Challenges and Advantages

While consistency has improved, the amount of pay remains a concern. Rising living costs mean salaries do not always cover basic needs. "We are paid on time, but the money itself is not enough," one soldier noted. This is especially difficult for single mothers and younger soldiers with dependents. Another interviewee stressed, "It is not just about being paid on time; it is about being able to live decently on that pay."

Some officers noted that reliance on external aid for broader state functions

makes pay vulnerable in the long run. "If cuts to aid continue, it will strain the government. That may not impact pay today, but it could tomorrow."

Way Forward

Future reforms should consider gradual salary increases to match inflation, as well as benefits packages (e.g., housing and food allowances). Leaders also suggested expanding financial literacy programs so soldiers can better manage income and prepare for deployment.

Living Conditions: Barracks and Dependents

Barrack conditions were flagged as poor in 2022, with inadequate housing, sanitation, and facilities for dependents. The report recommended renovating infrastructure and ensuring dependents had access to childcare and services.

Implementation and Achievements Since 2022

Leaders reported significant renovations underway. "In almost every county, some barracks are being rebuilt or repaired," one commander noted. Dependents are now better accommodated, and some facilities provide limited childcare support.

Another officer highlighted, "We have renovated a barracks near the airport, another in Saniquellie, and renovation is ongoing in Kakata and Grand Gedeh. The congestion of personnel at EBK will soon

be solved.”

Challenges and Advantages

Funding shortages and logistics limit how quickly renovations can be completed. Soldiers in remote areas still face substandard conditions. A female officer stressed: "Barracks in Monrovia are better now, but in the counties the situation is much worse." Another added, "Sometimes we even struggle with clean water for families."

Way Forward

Expanding renovation projects nationwide and ensuring equitable distribution of resources remain key. Greater international support is needed to finish projects already begun.

Leaders emphasized mobility—"Without vehicles, we cannot even monitor the barracks properly." A personnel officer added a concrete milestone: "By August or September, the civilians occupying the 72nd barracks will have to leave. Then we'll take it over and renovate."

Deployment: Training, Financial Literacy, Services for those who Served

The 2022 assessment highlighted inadequate pre-deployment training, especially in driving, computers, and language skills. Women who deployed also faced backlash from men who felt they were unfairly selected. The report recommended expanding training, providing financial literacy, and spreading

awareness about selection criteria.

Implementation and Achievements Since 2022

Progress has been made in expanding training opportunities. "Now, before deployment, everyone has to go through basic computer and driving courses," one officer explained. Leadership has also begun offering financial literacy training, though it is not yet universal. Awareness sessions about deployment criteria have helped reduce tensions.

Officers emphasized the importance of gender balance: "In any operation you go to, you need to have a woman there. At checkpoints, you cannot have only men doing searches. That is why we try to increase female participation before the UN even pushed for it."

Challenges and Advantages

Funding and infrastructure limit the reach of these programs. Some rural soldiers cannot access the same training opportunities as those near Monrovia. Cultural backlash still lingers: "Some men still believe women are chosen just because they are women," one female officer reported. Another said, "Men sometimes joke that if you are a woman, you will go to the mission before them. Those jokes hurt."

At the same time, AFL deployments are generally well-received by communities. "Some missions or operations, the locals did not even want the AFL to leave. They wanted the mission to continue," one

officer explained. This highlights the positive local perception of AFL's work.

Way Forward

Leaders suggested standardizing pre-deployment training nationwide and making financial literacy a mandatory part of preparation. They also recommended ongoing sensitization programs to reduce gendered backlash and normalize women's participation in deployments. According to the interviews, dependents of deployed members of the AFL still do not receive financial literacy training. This kind of training is crucial going forward, as many dependents still manage the finances of members of the AFL while they are deployed.

Ombudsman Process: Temporary Arrangements

The MOWIP assessment stressed the need for an independent ombudsman to handle complaints, especially around harassment and gender discrimination. At the time, no such mechanism existed.

Implementation and Achievements Since 2022

A temporary arrangement has been introduced where complaints can be directed to designated focal points. One leader noted: "It is not a full ombudsman, but at least soldiers know where to go now."

Legal officers emphasized that the process has limitations: "Our court martial board is not established yet, so we rely on a

temporary disciplinary board. We do not handle rape or murder cases — those are referred to the Ministry of Justice through an MOU. But confidentiality is strictly observed." Another added: "Even in the hearing, we never use the victim's name. We say 'Victim A' or 'Victim B' to protect them."

Challenges and Advantages

The system is limited by a lack of independence and resources. Soldiers may hesitate to use it, fearing retaliation. "We tell them to report, but if they fear their commander, they will keep quiet," a focal point admitted. Another added, "Some cases never reach us because soldiers think nothing will change."

Promisingly, however, the AFL has made strides to address this issue. One soldier noted that they expressed interest in going to law school. The higher ups in the AFL encouraged her to attend, and stated that they would cover the costs. She stated: "Quite recently, I took a bolster to go to the law school. In the army, all our law school students, they are male. So I took the first entrance, I didn't pass. I took the second one, I made it. So I went to the chief of staff, he said, this is it, this is my result. I want to go to school. And right there, he said anything it costs you; let us know to help you to go to school, because you're the first female to take this step." There were two members of the AFL whom we interviewed who noted that they were attending law school and that they were actively supported by the AFL to do so, in an effort to build up legal capacity

within the armed forces to address misconduct internally.

Way Forward

The AFL intends to work toward a more permanent and independent ombudsman office. Leaders emphasized that international support, both financial and technical, would be necessary. Training soldiers on how to use the process is also crucial. Several members of the AFL have received support from higher ups to attend law school. This indicates political will and an interest in building up internal legal capacity on the part of AFL leadership. However, in order for full implementation to occur, additional resources from the international community are necessary.

Conclusions

Since the 2022 MOWIP assessment, the AFL has made tangible progress in addressing barriers to women's participation and improving conditions for all soldiers.

Gains include new recruitment pathways for women, revisions to pregnancy and leave policies, improved healthcare and pay consistency, ongoing barracks renovations, expanded deployment training and support for members interested in attending law school. Still, challenges of funding, mobility, and entrenched gender norms remain. Leadership is committed, but as one officer summarized: "The will is here, but without vehicles and money, our hands are tied." As another gender focal point put it, "If I can make it, I know they can make it. It's just about talking to them, showing

them there is space for women in the army."

Overall, the AFL demonstrates both the potential of MOWIP assessments to drive reform and the limits imposed by structural constraints. Sustained international support—in funding, mobility, and technical expertise—remains essential if reforms are to be fully realized and institutionalized.