Women in the Norwegian Armed Forces
Gender Equality or Operational Imperative?

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Abstract: On 9 January 2007, Norwegian Minister of Defense Anne-Grete Strom-Erichsen delivered a speech at the Oslo Military Society on the status of the Norwegian armed forces. During this speech, she challenged the audience to join her in debating the possibility of introducing compulsory military service for women. The minister's address came in the midst of a debate that had been intensifying during 2006 and that ended with the government's decision in March 2008 to withdraw a proposal on compulsory military service for Norwegian women. This article looks at the arguments made in the minister's speech, asking what kinds of equality the increase in the numbers of women in the Norwegian armed forces would create and how these different equalities relate to new military challenges.

Keywords: conscription; gender equality; military; Norwegian armed forces; UN Security Council Resolution 1325; women

Introduction

On 9 January 2007, Norwegian Minister of Defense Anne-Grete Strom-Erichsen delivered a speech at the Oslo Military Society on the status of the Norwegian armed forces (Strom-Erichsen 2007a). Such a speech is given annually by the incumbent Norwegian minister of defense, but the 2007 speech was made particularly noteworthy by the final point raised by the minister, namely, the underrepresentation of women in the Norwegian armed forces. In

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her speech, Strom-Erichsen challenged the audience to join her in debating the possibility of introducing compulsory military service for women. Her suggestion was not simply well received: it triggered an enthusiastic round of applause among the largely male and uniformed audience.

The day before the speech, the minister had also published a statement under the heading “Diversity and Gender Equality” on the website of the Ministry of Defense (Strom-Erichsen 2007b). In this, she argued that the current gender balance in the Norwegian military failed to reflect the gender composition of Norwegian society as a whole, and that Norway’s armed forces should also reflect the ethnic diversity found within Norwegian society. In addition, she insisted that Norway’s armed forces needed new kinds of knowledge, experience and expertise to meet new military and security challenges.

The minister’s statement and speech came in the midst of a debate that had been intensifying during 2006 and that ended with the government’s decision in March 2008 to withdraw a proposal on compulsory military service for Norwegian women. This article will examine the arguments made in the minister’s speech, asking what kinds of equality an increase in the numbers of women within the Norwegian armed forces would create and how these different equalities might relate to new military challenges.

With the ending of the Cold War and the development of a new security situation between and amongst states, the need for different kinds of military preparedness and responses has emerged. Among the many suggestions for responses to changes in the international security context have been calls for the increased representation of women as well as for “gender mainstreaming” within military systems. The main push for gender mainstreaming has taken place in the context of international military peace operations, with the United Nations (UN) being the main advocate for such a development. Thus, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, adopted in October 2000 (hereafter referred to as “Resolution 1325”), calls on UN member-states to increase the number of women within their armed forces, and to provide gender training to all military staff (UN Security Council 2000). This resolution can be said to have provided the framework and language for the Norwegian government’s focus on women in the Norwegian armed forces, and we will therefore outline its contents in greater detail below. However, before doing so, let us first spend some time on the different conceptualizations of gender equality that may be said to have characterized each successive decade since the early 1970s.

**Conceptualizations of Gender Equality**

Norms and ideals of gender equality have been given different expressions over time. Squires (2004, 19) suggests that these various expressions can be classified in terms of equal treatment (characteristic of the 1970s), positive action (characteristic of the 1980s), gender mainstreaming (characteristic of the 1990s) and multiple inequalities (since 2000). Each set of norms has been accompanied by its own distinctive set of arguments related to the need for gender equality. Thus, argues Squires (2009), equal treatment is a question of the inclusion of women’s rights in areas of former male dominance, with the major tool for achieving this being legislative changes to ensure that women and men enjoy the same rights and opportunities. Positive action, on the other hand, is based on the argument that women may have something different — and thus new — to offer in political settings from which they have pre-
viously been excluded; women's gender identities—as well as their experiences (and some would argue biological composition)—may offer a potential for different kinds of reasoning and arguing, ones that may have been overlooked and ignored in the past. Mainstreaming, on the other hand, should ideally "involve identifying how existing systems and structures cause indirect discrimination and altering or redesigning them as appropriate" (Rees 2001, 46–48, quoted in Squires 2004, 19). Finally, the current focus on multiple inequalities is based on the argument that gender differences intersect with other identities in hierarchical orders, creating multiple inequalities based not just on gender but also on additional identities such as class, race and ethnicity.

These conceptualizations of gender equality have grown out of discussions about the political participation of women in parliaments and governments. In contrast, despite the obvious links between gender and military structures, conceptualizations of gender equality within the military have, until recently, been the subject of little research. Presumably, this is because militarism and masculinity are so closely interconnected that gender equality as a concept has appeared to have little relevance to military studies. Hopton (2003, 113) has noted that:

Historically, there is a reciprocal relationship between militarism and masculinity. On the one hand, politicians have utilized ideologies of idealized masculinity that valorize the notion of strong active males collectively risking their personal safety for the greater good of their wider community, gaining support for the state's use of violence, such as wars in the international arena and aggressive policing in the domestic situation. On the other hand, militarism feeds into ideologies of masculinity through the eroticization of stoicism, risk taking and even lethal violence.

Increasing numbers of publications focusing on the interconnections between gender and military relations are now emerging, however. In this context, one of the core arguments that cuts across numerous book volumes and academic articles is the notion that militarization, i.e. processes of becoming a proper member of the military community, are processes of masculinization par excellence (Braud 2005; Carreiras 2006; Dudink, Hagerman and Tosh 2004; Enloe 2000; Higate 2003; Iskra et al. 2002; and Skjelsbæk 2007).

The values, thinking and modes of behavior that are most highly appreciated within military organizations are traditionally seen as more connected to masculinity than femininity—or, put slightly differently, as connected to a stereotypical construction of male and female relations. It is not just any kind of man the military seeks; it is a particular kind of masculine male. Higate (2003, 29) argues that the military can be seen as a gendered performance that clusters around violence, aggression, rationality and a sense of invulnerability. Maintaining this particular form of masculinity, argues Higate, might be problematic in civilian life if these expressions of masculinity are not as highly valued as they are within a military organization. Enloe (2000) argues, further, that militarized masculinity can only exist because there are women who play their roles vis-à-vis their militarized men in particular ways. Military wives are crucial in keeping military men happy. This is particularly important, continues Enloe (2000, 71), when military men are stationed in foreign countries. In order to maintain military support and keep the military-civilian nexus in balance, there needs to be a system of mutual support between men and women—both within and outside the military. This system of mutual support builds on a gendered division of labor between the military man and his military wife. The ideal military wife is one who sees herself as part of the military community, where her role is to support her husband's career and
in return to receive privileges according to his rank. When her support for the military stops—perhaps because she does not believe in the military cause, because she has a career of her own that conflicts with the demands placed on her military husband, or because her husband has extramarital relations abroad—she puts the fragile military-civilian nexus out of balance in ways that can have detrimental political effects. Segal (1995), who has studied women’s military participation, argues that changes in gender norms outside the military also affect the degree to which military women are willing to accept the masculinized norms within the military. Increased acceptance of less traditional roles for women in civilian society can make it more socially and culturally acceptable for women to enter highly masculinized arenas outside the military, but this does not necessarily change the masculine norms within military organizations; it simply provides women with a greater repertoire of identity constructions. Segal’s arguments seemingly contradict Enloe’s argument that the military is dependent on traditional gender norms. Segal emphasizes the way that changes in the expectations that women hold and in what is expected of women can open the way for more women to enter military organizations, because the repercussions for women making such a choice diminish.

The descriptions and arguments of Enloe, Higate, Hopton and Segal suggest that the ways in which masculinity becomes militarized depend on several factors both within and outside a military organization. Higate and Hopton demonstrate that masculinity becomes militarized through its association with particular forms of behavior, attitudes and actions, while Enloe shows us that the role of women outside the military also serves as a crucial determinant. Consequently, when the roles and behaviors of women outside the military change, this might also change the militarization processes of men within the military. A highly militarized man may be greatly valued in civilian settings where gender roles are conducive to this particular expression of masculinity, but might not be equally appreciated in other civilian settings where such an expression of masculinity is less valued.

Arguing for increasing the number of women within the Norwegian armed forces, and for gender mainstreaming military activities, is therefore a balancing act between the masculine culture within the military organization and the gender norms that exist outside the military structure. As we will demonstrate below, over the last couple of decades the expectations held by women outside military organizations have changed, as has what is expected of women, at both the international and the national levels.

The International Setting

It was not until the mid-1990s that issues of women’s rights and gender equality emerged on the agenda of those entities within the UN system that deal with peace and security matters (Trygstad, forthcoming). This new agenda formed part of a larger paradigmatic shift about the ways that international peace and security were to be defined and understood, of which the adoption of Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security was but one expression. In addition, the new women’s agenda was a direct response to pressing operational challenges in the field. These changes had a direct effect on the discourse on gender equality and women in the military.
Normative Changes

In 1996–97, with the backing of UN entities such as the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the Department for the Advancement of Women (DAW), the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) launched a study to investigate ways of mainstreaming a gender perspective in multidimensional peacekeeping operations (Stiehm 2000). This study was clearly influenced by the dominant conceptualization of gender equality at the time, namely, that of "gender mainstreaming." In 1997, the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) agreed on a gender-mainstreaming policy for the UN system, defining the mainstreaming of a gender perspective as:

the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality [UN Economic and Social Council 1997].

The DPKO study, which was partly funded by the Norwegian government, resulted in the Windhoek Declaration and the Namibia Plan of Action on Mainstreaming a Gender Perspective in Multidimensional Peace Support Operations launched in May 2000. Both of these documents were important precursors to Resolution 1325, which again paved the way for a growing recognition of the need to analyze and understand peace and conflict matters also along gender lines.

Through the adoption of Resolution 1325 in October 2000, the members of the UN Security Council acknowledged — for the first time in the Council's history — that gender-related concerns are relevant to international peace and security. The resolution addresses both women's rights to equal opportunities and gender mainstreaming. One of the core principles expressed in the resolution is the need to view women as actors and agents for change in conflicts and post-conflict situations, rather than solely as victims. Thus, the resolution calls for women's inclusion in political decision making forums, peace negotiations and peace building processes. The UN Secretary General and UN member-states are challenged to do more in terms of appointing women to high-level positions, both at headquarters and in field missions, and to recruit a larger number of women as peacekeepers. If fully implemented, the provisions of the resolution would alter traditional perceptions of gender roles in relation to peace and security matters at both international and national levels.

Resolution 1325 contains eighteen provisions, of which three are of particular relevance to the military. Provision no. 4 urges the UN Secretary-General to expand the role and contribution of women in UN field-based operations, highlighting the need for more women among military observers as critical in this context. In Provision no. 5, the Security Council expresses its willingness to incorporate a gender perspective into peacekeeping operations, urging the Secretary-General to include a gender component in field operations. Further, in Provision no. 6 the Council asks the Secretary-General to provide member-states with training guidelines and materials on the protection, rights and particular needs of women, as well as on the importance of involving women in all peacekeeping and peace building measures. The member-states are also invited to incorporate these elements into their national training programs for military and civilian police personnel.

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The adoption of Resolution 1325 was a groundbreaking international achievement that made "women, peace and security" concerns part of international law. Today, the gender-mainstreaming regime within the UN thus incorporates a broad set of norms covering the whole spectrum from development to peace and security — including UN peace operations.

**Changed Operational Requirements**

During the 1990s, UN peace operations changed dramatically — in nature, in size and in scope. What were once activities performed by small, unarmed military observer units developed into large operations with comprehensive and multifunctional mandates — with correspondingly large numbers of personnel. Operational mandates included everything from military stabilization to the provision of humanitarian aid and election monitoring. In some instances, UN peace operations also functioned as transitional administrations responsible for the reconstruction of infrastructure and reorganization of the security sector. Peacekeeping was no longer an all-male and masculine undertaking. Increasingly, peacekeeping forces were expanded to include police personnel and different categories of civilian personnel, which again opened up career opportunities for a growing number of women. From the perspective of the UN, more women were needed to fill a great variety of civilian postings. For the individual woman seeking a career in the UN, opportunities for employment greatly expanded. Even the military components of peace operations were expected to combine traditional military and masculine values with softer, perhaps more feminine, approaches to the way they conducted their tasks.

At the time when Resolution 1325 was adopted, arguments in its favor tended to be of a rights-based character, focusing particularly on women's equal rights to participation at all levels of conflict management. Within the context of UN peace operations, for example, the promotion of women's rights was among the core arguments made in favor of increasing the numbers of women peacekeepers. Women had a right to be represented and to pursue a career in peace operations too, though they were not being encouraged to do so on a strategic level. In recent years, however, arguments in favor of increasing the number of women in peace operations seem to rest on pressing resource considerations and issues of operational efficiency, rather than on concerns of gender equality.

Since the early 1990s, the number of UN operations has grown steadily, as has the number of peacekeeping personnel. In 2008, UN peacekeeping reached an all-time high, with eighteen operations under UN command and control and over 112,000 uniformed and civilian personnel in the field (Center on International Cooperation 2009). Currently, UN peacekeeping capacities are overstretched, and the organization is in great need of more qualified personnel. Women have appeared on the scene as a resource that remains largely untapped, as the following figures show rather clearly:

- Of the eighteen ongoing UN peace operations, only two are headed by a woman.
- Women constitute 1 percent of the military personnel in UN peace operations.
- Women constitute 4 percent of the police personnel in UN peace operations.
- Women constitute approximately 30 percent of the international civilian personnel, but this number decreases to around 10 percent if we look at leadership positions (principal officers, directors and above).
Women constitute 22 percent of nationally/locally recruited personnel (although they are predominantly placed in low-ranking positions such as secretaries, cleaners, etc.).

At a meeting in New York in March 2006, UN troop-contributing countries discussed the issue of increasing the number of military women. The outcome document from this meeting stated that "the deployment of female peacekeepers has become not just desirable, but an operational imperative" (UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations 2006). The large and multifunctional character of modern UN operations requires new forms of leadership and new areas of competence and experience among the world organization's personnel. UN operations are mandated with a broad range of tasks, including some that at times are difficult or even impossible to assign to men. The UN has argued that more women in observation units will make it easier for local women to report sexual assaults, for example. More military women are also needed to conduct tasks such as body searches of local women at checkpoints. It is also argued that, through their mere presence, a larger number of women within peace operations will reduce the scope of sexual abuse and exploitation by UN personnel.

Recruitment of more women to peace operations, however, is not something the UN can do on its own. The organization is dependent on contributions from its member-states. On 8 March 2007, the DPKO issued a press statement encouraging member-states to send more women to peacekeeping operations. More specifically, the DPKO encouraged member-states to double the number of women within their national armed forces over the next five years (Inter Press Service 2007). The arguments put forward by the UN in favor of more uniformed women have found resonance among Norwegian politicians and military professionals. Norway is among the most ardent supporters of the UN financially, politically and morally. It also stands out as one of a small number of countries with a national action plan for the implementation of Resolution 1325. A commitment to increase the number of women in the Norwegian armed forces forms part of this plan, and this commitment is undoubtedly influenced by the international developments described above, as well as by the repeated requests from the UN for member-states to contribute more women. In addition, it is influenced by the experiences of Norwegian military units serving in international operations such as the UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. For the current Norwegian government, with its focus on gender-equality measures and efforts to strengthen the UN, it would be unthinkable not to follow up in some manner on the repeated requests from the UN to do more to increase the numbers of women in the military.

The Norwegian Setting: Women in the Norwegian Armed Forces

The story of women in the Norwegian armed forces is a tale of ambitious intentions and poor follow-up. Though Norwegians often regard themselves as world champions in gender equality, the country's record when it comes to gender equality in the military is not particularly impressive. Indeed, the majority of Norway's fellow NATO members have higher levels of participation by women within their militaries. These include Belgium (8.25 percent), Canada (17.3 percent), France (14 percent), Germany (7.5 percent), Hungary (17.3 percent), Latvia (23 percent), Lithuania (12 percent), the Netherlands (9 percent), Portugal (13
percent), Slovenia (15.3 percent), Spain (12 percent), the United Kingdom (9.3 percent) and the USA (14 percent).

However, it has not always been this way. During World War II, Norwegian women between the ages of 18 and 40 who lived abroad (notably in Canada and Great Britain) were enlisted and served in the Norwegian army, marines and air force. The temporary conscription of women in Norway was in effect from 24 July 1942 until the end of the war on 8 May 1945. This arrangement was very much in line with what Segal (1995) has noted with regard to other military systems: when the security threat is sufficiently high and the need for personnel increases, the military and political will to include women in military ranks also increases. This opening up for women, however, is more often than not seen as an aberration in response to particular needs, and it does not necessarily represent a new and permanent change. Such was the case in Norway after World War II: while some female military organizations lobbied for a permanent opening for women within the Norwegian armed forces, the temporary arrangements referred to above were brought to an end by a parliamentary decision of 1947 that women could hold only civilian positions within the military (Vårnø and Sveri 1990). In the aftermath of the war, the story of Norway’s military women has been largely overlooked. Few—if indeed any—have been commemorated by Norwegian officials.

Nevertheless, since 1984 Norwegian women have had the same opportunities as men to serve in all military functions, including combat roles, although they have not had the same obligations as men with regard to military service. Norway has compulsory military service for men. In reality, however, only one-third of every age cohort (approximately 10,000 young men per year) completes this service. Men who do not wish to serve in the military may plead conscientious objection and be assigned a “civil service” task instead. In 2008, 711 persons chose this option (Venepliktisverket 2008).

In the mid–1990s, almost 4.5 percent of the Norwegian armed forces were women, a figure that by the mid–2000s had increased only to 7 percent. The current Norwegian government has declared that one of its goals is to increase the level of women’s participation in the Norwegian armed forces to 20 percent by the end of 2020 (Forsvardsdepartementet 2007, 8). To achieve this, a radical first step involved inviting all young women born in 1989 to voluntary military-assessment sessions (which are compulsory for men in the same age group) in 2007. Of about 30,000 women invited, 7,277 responded positively to this invitation, and as of January 2008 some 3,966 had attended assessment sessions.

The next step proposed by the government was the introduction of compulsory military conscription for girls—or what the minister of defense and military leaders prefer to call “gender-neutral conscription.” Naturally, this suggestion created heated debate within Norway’s coalition government, in parliament, among intellectuals and within women’s groups of different kinds (many of which referred to the proposal as “compulsory female conscription”). In the end, when the government presented its long-term plan for the Norwegian armed forces in March 2008, the proposal on gender-neutral conscription was laid to rest. However, a new law was passed by the Norwegian parliament in June 2009, introducing compulsory military-assessment sessions for young women as from 1 January 2010. Though less radical than the proposals for gender-neutral conscription, this is still quite a radical new law, and one that was passed with little public debate. It leaves Norway as one of very few countries in the world with such a compulsory arrangement for women.

Though the government ultimately decided to drop the proposal on gender-neutral
military conscription, it is both interesting and informative to return to the debate on this issue during its peak in 2006–07 to see what it reveals about the way that gender equality is conceptualized in relation to the military. Such an analysis is particularly interesting in the light of the fact that gender-neutral conscription has been identified as a long-term goal by both the current minister of defense, key leaders within the Norwegian armed forces and prominent politicians from several of Norway's largest political parties. It is likely that debate on the issue will reemerge, particularly if the current system of compulsory military-assessment sessions for women does not lead to a substantial increase in the number of women in the Norwegian armed forces.

The Norwegian Debates 2006–07

Returning to the statement on diversity and gender equality by Norwegian Minister of Defense Anne-Grete Strøm-Erichsen (2007b), published on the Ministry of Defense website, it is worth quoting in some length the minister's accounts of the need for women within the military in order to examine what is said about gender relations in Norway and the role of the military. Strøm-Erichsen writes that "to create a dynamic and well functioning military organization, the Armed Forces depend on a diversity of human resources. An important personal goal for me is that the Armed Forces shall reflect the multi-ethnic and socially diverse nature of our society." She continues by emphasizing:

We need to attract more women to the defense sector. Women have the same rights as men to all positions, both military and civilian, in our Armed Forces. Yet, our organization is still essentially male dominated. Only seven percent of our military personnel, including those on contract, are women — and we want to increase this number! Through tailored campaigns and inviting young women to attend voluntary military classification interviews, the Armed Forces want to make it clear that women are needed, wanted and welcome in the Forces.

Nor is she solely concerned with gender equality. She also points out:

Over recent decades Norway has become an ethnically multicultural country. The Armed Forces need to draw on the experience and the knowledge which the different cultural groups represent. Cultural competence is a central factor for success when international operations are planned and executed. Both at home and abroad our Armed Forces should be a showcase for our democratic political system based on human rights, ethnic diversity and gender equality.

The arguments put forward above were restated by the minister on several occasions throughout 2007, in speeches, op-eds and public debates, where they were generally wrapped in references to Norway's international obligation to implement the provisions of Resolution 1325. The four main arguments made by the minister in her statement with regard to her wish to include more women in the Norwegian armed forces can be summarized as follows:

1. Women have the same rights as men to all positions within the Norwegian armed forces, both military and civilian.
2. The Norwegian armed forces need to draw on the different experiences and knowledge that different cultural groups represent.
3. The Norwegian armed forces should be a showcase for Norway's democratic political system.

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4. The Norwegian armed forces rely on a diversity of human resources in order to be dynamic and well-functioning.

If we examine Strøm-Erichsen’s arguments from the vantage point of the different conceptualizations of gender equality advanced by Squires (2004; 2009), we can see that the two approaches contain large areas of overlap. The military participation of women in the Norwegian armed forces is seen, first, as a question of rights—and thereby of equal treatment. Second, the military participation of women is seen as a question of integrating different experiences and knowledge in the Norwegian armed forces—and thereby as positive action. Third, the Norwegian armed forces need to be seen as being more in line with Norwegian society at large in order to be a showcase on the international stage; in order for this to be the case, gender mainstreaming within the Norwegian armed forces must reflect the ways in which gender has been mainstreamed within Norwegian society at large. Finally, the Norwegian armed forces depend on a diversity of human resources, which means that soldiers who represent different intersectionalities between gender, ethnicity, race and class are construed as new resources in new and complex military operations—especially in peacekeeping settings in foreign countries. This last point is in stark contrast to the notion of the military as a form of homogenous militarized masculinity. These arguments will now be examined in more detail.

The Rights and Equal-Treatment Argument

Norwegians pride themselves as being among the world’s most advanced nations when it comes to gender equality, and with good reason. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2007, published by the World Economic Forum (2007), the gender gap in Norway is the second smallest in the world (out of 128 countries ranked). This report captures the magnitude of the gap between women and men in the following four critical areas: economic participation and opportunity; political empowerment; educational attainment; and health services. What has been achieved in Norway in terms of gender equality is closely linked with active government intervention and policies dating back to the early 1970s. The term state feminism (Hernes 1987) can be said to characterize Norwegian statehood. The state is regarded as the best guarantor of women’s rights through its adoption of legislation, accountability mechanisms and comprehensive family policies. Among the outcomes of this kind of thinking was the establishment in 1972 of Norway’s Council for Gender Equality (Likestillingsrådet), which played an essential role in developing Norwegian equality politics in the 1970s—especially with respect to the passing of the 1979 Gender Equality Act (Likestillingsloven) and the establishment of the Gender Equality Ombudsperson. The Gender Equality Act makes discrimination on the basis of gender illegal. Furthermore, under its terms, women and men are granted equal rights to education; all official committees and boards must have a gender-balanced composition; and gender-discriminatory commercials and advertisements are banned. The Act also opened the way for a quota system in areas where there was a marked gender imbalance (Norsk Offentlig Utredning 1995, Chapter Four), as for instance in politics.

It was as a consequence of these legislative changes that the government opened up all positions within the Norwegian armed forces—including combat roles—to women in 1984. This reform was passed in a separate act that provided women with the same rights and
opportunities as men to pursue a military career. Women were not, however, assigned the same obligation to perform military service, and military service and the conscription system remained compulsory only for Norwegian men. Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that for more than twenty years Norwegian women have enjoyed the same opportunities as men to have a military career, very few have chosen to do so. For many years, the level of women’s representation within the Norwegian armed forces remained stable at around 5–6 percent, while the current level of 8 percent represents a meager growth from 7 percent in 2007.

The new focus on women in the Norwegian armed forces, along with the defense minister’s speech and initiatives in favor of military conscription for women, created an unanticipated response. The Equal Rights Act of 1984—which had appeared unproblematic for more than two decades—was now seen to lay bare the gender-discriminatory practices of male military conscription. In the subsequent public debates over “gender-neutral military conscription,” the argument was made by a variety of actors on the Norwegian public scene—including the Socialist Left Party, the gender-research milieu at the University of Oslo, the Soldiers Union and the Gender Equality Ombudsperson—that the current system of conscription is gender discriminatory, and thereby at odds with Norwegian society at large. Accordingly, all of the above actors strongly supported the minister’s suggestion of implementing “gender-neutral military conscription,” because this would be more in line with current gender-equality practices. The counter-argument from the political parties on the right, Christian family groups and leading women’s groups in the Norwegian Labor Party has been that, as long as women continue to have the greatest responsibilities in the home in connection with childbirth, adding yet another responsibility—and making this an obligation—could critically disadvantage women in the competitive labor market, from which they might be potentially excluded for several valuable years.

Different Experiences and Knowledge Argument

The second major argument made by the minister of defense is that women have unique experiences and knowledge that the Norwegian armed forces need. This way of thinking is very much in line with Norwegian politics generally. Norwegian women are undoubtedly among the most empowered in the world, politically speaking. In the current government, ten out of nineteen ministers are women, including the ministers of finance and defense. Since 1986, when former prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland first launched her “Woman Government,” at least 40 percent of the members of Norwegian governments have been women, and between 30 percent and 40 percent of the members of parliament have also been women. Also, three of the six current leaders of major political parties are women, representing both the Socialist Left and the right-wing Progress Party. High-profile women in politics have become the rule rather than the exception on the Norwegian political scene.

On the socioeconomic level, female students today outnumber male students at universities and colleges in Norway, and Norwegian women have a much higher representation in the labor force than their European sisters. Norwegian women’s participation in the labor force is especially high among the 25–40 age group, and has increased considerably since the 1970s. This observation becomes particularly interesting when we take into account that the fertility rate among Norwegian women within this age group is among the highest in Europe. Compared with other countries, the gap between women’s and men’s participation in the labor force in Norway is small (69 percent of women and 76 percent of men are in employ-
ment). According to Segal’s assumption that an increase in the participation of women in the labor force will lead to larger numbers of women in the military, therefore, Norwegian women should be well placed to pursue military careers. However, the numbers tell a different story: Norwegian women generally find the military unattractive as a career path. Why is this?

First, a closer look at the participation of women within the labor force shows that Norwegian women’s choice of work is much more gender-stereotypical than is the case for other women in Europe. In fact, according to an OECD report (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2002) the Norwegian labor force is the most gender-segregated in Europe. Most women are employed in the public sector, in health care or in education. Men, on the other hand, dominate the private sector and technical professions. In addition, most part-time workers are women. One explanation for why women and men choose such different career paths is that they have different life projects: Norwegian women tend to be more geared towards jobs that enable them to combine family and work commitments rather than pursuing careers and leadership positions where they might have to sacrifice time with their families. The fact that a successful military career in Norway increasingly depends on participation in international peace operations may therefore discourage many women from pursuing a military career.

Second, one of the policy recommendations in the Norwegian government’s Action Plan for the Implementation of Resolution 1325, as well as a recommendation in a government white paper on women in the military (Forsvarendepartementet 2007), is to reserve at least 25% of the places at officer training schools for women. The idea behind this recommendation is that ensuring a high level of representation of women in military leadership positions will also increase the numbers of women in the organization at large. In addition, women would be recruited to positions where they would be able to exert influence. While such a course of action may seem logical, an examination of women in the Norwegian labor force at large suggests that such a prioritization may have been somewhat misguided. The opportunity for leadership training and high-level positions may not necessarily act as an incentive for women to join the military, since many Norwegian women apparently do not have leadership aspirations. Norwegian women are also more likely to resign from leadership positions than Norwegian men (Skjeie and Teigen 2003, 121). Furthermore, for years the Norwegian unemployment rate has been exceptionally low, and a career in the military is therefore not something that a woman in Norway might choose simply to get a job, as is often the case in many other countries.

The Showcase and Gender-Mainstreaming Argument

If the Norwegian armed forces are to be a showcase internationally for Norway’s democratic, political system, it is worth asking which aspects of Norway’s gender-equality culture the minister of defense would like the country’s military structures to reflect.

Though they remain far from equal, over the last few decades there has been a dramatic change in the ways that women and men share duties in the home. Women and men are also strongly encouraged to share domestic responsibilities through a variety of direct government interventions. At the present time, a heated discussion is taking place about how to divide the one-year paid parental leave to which couples are entitled when they have a child. Currently the first six weeks are reserved for the mother, while the rest of the year can

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be split between the mother and father, though the father must take a minimum of ten weeks. In reality, however, it is mostly women who take out the majority of the parental leave, while fathers work longer hours, nurturing their careers rather than their children.

The current proposal being debated by the government is whether to change the parental leave system so that it is divided into three parts, whereby the mother takes out one-third, the father another third, and the couple can decide for themselves who will take out the remaining third. This suggestion comes from two sources: a governmental group mandated to look at the increasing gap between men's and women's income in Norway (Likedomskommisjonen), and a governmental group mandated to look at men's roles in Norwegian society (Mannspanellet). In the first case, the argument was that employers should not put women who have children at a disadvantage; if men are away from working life in the same way as women when they have children, this might lead to a decrease in the income gap between women and men. In the latter case, the argument was that men want legislative measures that enable them to spend more time with their newborn children. By extension, male members of the Mannspanel voiced an emergent feeling among many Norwegian men, namely, that they were being discriminated against in the domestic sphere of family life.

When the Mannspanel launched its report on 3 March 2008, it also made a further argument about discrimination against men: the report identified gender-neutral military conscription as a must, and stated that the current system of compulsory male military service discriminated against men. It is natural to see these two arguments in connection: if men are to be more active in the domestic sphere, women will have more time and opportunity to be active in the public sphere, including the military. This would entail, however, that military men also take on a greater share of domestic responsibilities, including parental leave. One former chief of staff of the Norwegian army, Brigadier General Robert Mood, maintained that it is also important to adopt and promote "family-friendly" policies for the military. He argued that the military must appear as a much more modern organization if it is to appeal both to women and to men. Also, a more "family-friendly" environment has become increasingly important for those serving in the Norwegian armed forces. A recent study of family life among officers in the Norwegian armed forces reveals that personal strains on the individual have become much greater, and the divorce rate among army couples is higher than in civilian society (Heen and Halryanjo 2006). Furthermore, the divorce rate is strongly correlated with the number and length of international deployments, presumably because the traditional gender roles of men and women in Norway are changing, and women are less willing to take on all of the responsibilities of the home than they were a generation ago. In other words, women in Norway are doing what Enloe (2000) predicted: altering the fine balance between masculine and feminine roles within and outside the military, and thereby making problems for the militarized men within the military structures.

In terms of gender relations, it is interesting to see the military in relation to the social construction of families. The Norwegian armed forces enjoy strong support among the Norwegian population, irrespective of gender. Norway's compulsory military service has been referred to as a kind of *ritual de passage* for young boys "turning into men" and as an important common life experience. In a poll of February 2008, 90 percent of the population (93 percent of men and 87 percent of women) was of the opinion that Norway needs a military defense. Further, 83 percent thought that Norway should retain its military service system (conscription). Here, the numbers in favor of the military service system were slightly higher among women (84 percent) than among men (81 percent). However, when asked whether
military service (conscription) should apply to both women and men, only 57 percent of those polled (56 percent of women and 58 percent of men) responded in favor of such a change. The poll did not allow for any further investigation of the reasons for the position that those polled took on gender-neutral conscription. However, in a society that is marked by a discourse on gender equality in all other spheres of public life, we find these figures concerning the military interesting. They are indicative of the ways that Norwegian women and men still view certain gender roles as more masculine or feminine than others. The poll also shows that the parameters for discussing gender equality and mainstreaming of gender within the military remain tied to the conscription system, and that gender equality is then a question of making the “inside” gender culture of the military more compatible with the “outside” gender culture — through conscription.

The Multiple Diversity Argument

During the last ten to fifteen years, the Norwegian armed forces have gone through a process of transformation and downsizing, where the focus has been less on territorial defense against invasion forces, and more on training and equipping the Norwegian armed forces for participation in international operations to defend against less clearly identifiable — and possibly also more indirect — threats to Norwegian security (Greger 2007, Rieker 2003, Ulriksen 2007). In addition, international operations have become increasingly complex and challenging, demanding more of military personnel in terms of training and skills than was ever the case during the Cold War. This represents a great challenge for the Norwegian armed forces, and these developments have also altered the self-image of the Norwegian soldier (Haaland 2008). Today, in many ways, participation in international operations has become a prerequisite for a successful military career. Service in international operations, such as in Afghanistan, not only gives the soldier a considerable salary increase, but also tends to boost his or her military career upon return to Norway.

Participation in international military operations requires new skills on the part of soldiers on several levels. First, the conflict patterns within which such operations take place are complex and often — in military language — asymmetrical. There might be no clear enemy, and the security threats are found on multiple levels simultaneously. The weaponry used by the adversaries in the conflict might be both unconventional (e.g. suicide bombing) and conventional (e.g. regular bombs). Further, this weaponry can be managed by private actors (such as for instance terrorist groups) as well as by state militaries. Second, the overarching aim for many of the international operations that are taking place today — under UN, NATO, and even European Union (EU) and African Union (AU) auspices — is not just to stop fighting, but to rebuild societies after conflict. This is the case, for instance, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which today has an EU-led international military presence (EUFOR), and in Timor-Leste, to which the UN Integrated Mission (UNMIT) has been assigned. The complexity of the situation was emphasized by the Norwegian government in its white paper on the recruitment of women to the Norwegian armed forces, which states that:

The Norwegian military is a complex organization, with a range of different competences, which is asked to operate in unpredictable situations both nationally and internationally. The Norwegian armed forces therefore need a wide variety of people with diverse backgrounds and skills in order to fulfill the military’s roles and functions in the best way possible. It is therefore important to recruit people from diverse settings with
diverse experiences. In order to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow, there is a need to recruit from the entire population — not just from one half [Forsvarsdepartementet 2007, 9].

According to the white paper, the recruitment of women into the Norwegian armed forces is not only a question of increasing the numbers of women in order to counterbalance the overwhelming male majority; it is also a step towards making the Norwegian armed forces more diverse overall. The aim, one might argue, is to make the Norwegian armed forces more complex — and thereby more compatible with the diverse needs of the international operations in which Norway is currently taking part or may take part in the future. Gender equality, then, is one aspect of a larger equality project that aims to make diversity one of the hallmarks and strengths of an organization that in the past has been construed as a white heterosexual masculine structure. The aforementioned white paper shows this clearly when it goes on to state that:

A diverse organization can be understood as an organization with considerable diversity in the composition of its staff. This diversity will include gender, sexual orientation, ethnic background, and age. In order to meet new challenges in a positive fashion, it is important to have teams that consist of personnel with different backgrounds and experiences. With multiple diversities, there is a potential for greater variation in perspectives on how to solve and approach different tasks [Forsvarsdepartementet 2007, 11].

Within this conceptualization, then, gender equality is simultaneously part of two processes: transforming the outlook of the Norwegian armed forces in order to match the increasingly diversified outlook of Norway and Norwegians at large, and, as a consequence, transforming the Norwegian armed forces into an organization that in itself is more complex and thereby presumably more fit to meet the complex security and military challenges on the ground in international operations. How the Norwegian Armed Forces might succeed with their efforts to become more diverse remains to be seen.

Gender Equality or Operational Imperative?

Discussions about increasing the military participation of women in Norway cluster around two core arguments. On the one hand, the political leadership argues that we need the Norwegian armed forces to be more in tune with Norwegian society at large. The primary aim of an increase in women's military participation is therefore a symbolic one. According to this line of argument, the Norwegian armed forces are to be regarded as a reflection of and a window onto a gender-equal and multicultural Norwegian society, as Minister of Defense Strom-Eriksen argues. In international military operations, the thought is that this make-over of the Norwegian armed forces can have a positive normative effect on other participating countries, as well as on the host country in which an operation is deployed.

On the other hand, the military leadership argues that increased military participation by women is connected to new security challenges. The major aim of an increase in the numbers of women within the Norwegian armed forces is to secure different competencies for the organization. By increasing the number of women, the Norwegian armed forces will expand the range and variety of skills and qualifications upon which they might draw, which again is thought to make them more effective and better fitted to meet new security chal-
lenges. Thus, this military rhetoric tends to emphasize operational imperatives, as well as Norway’s international obligations (notably Resolution 1325).

In the heated public debate that has followed the political and military initiative on gender-neutral conscription, arguments both for and against seem equally prominent. Those in favor tend to refer to matters of principle: that the current system is unfair and discriminatory—especially for Norwegian men. However, they also argue that because women are not actively exposed to the Norwegian armed forces through compulsory military service, they are more easily excluded from careers within an important institution of power and influence in Norwegian society.

Those who are against gender-neutral conscription also refer to matters of principle, albeit from another perspective. Is it gender equality to also teach women to kill, they ask? Why should women be militarized or made masculine? Many also claim that Norwegian women are already “doing their service” through giving birth, breastfeeding, and bearing the most of the responsibility for the early upbringing of children. Some even claim that the Norwegian government’s references to international obligations as a key argument in favor of increasing the number of women in the armed forces constitute a misuse of Resolution 1325. The government is hiding, they claim, the fact that it needs more personnel to undertake the resource-demanding tasks of the controversial operation in Afghanistan. Interestingly, those most in favor of gender-neutral conscription seem to be men, while it is women who have argued most strongly against it. In particular women who took a pioneering role in the fight for women’s rights in the 1970s have been critical of this new initiative towards full gender equality within the Norwegian armed forces. Inevitably, the question of women within the Norwegian armed forces is not just a national military issue, but ultimately a question of what the military’s role should be in international operations (whether under the auspices of the UN, NATO, the EU or other coalitions).

Calls for the abolition of conscription and the creation of a professional army open to men and women on equal terms have been conspicuously absent from the Norwegian debate. This is all the more interesting given that all of the NATO countries that have achieved much higher levels of women’s participation within their armed forces than Norway have done so without conscription. Sweden is an example of a country that has chosen a different strategy for meeting the new security challenges and changing operational needs: it has opted to professionalize its defense force and to abolish conscription by 2014 (Tolgfors 2009).

If Norway opts for a professional army, the parameters of the Norwegian debates will change. Notions of gender equality will also change accordingly, and the link between gender and new operational imperatives will need to be redefined. It will therefore be worth following the developments in Norway from both gender and military perspectives.

References


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Squires, Judith. 2009. Oral presentation at research conference held at Voskenløsen, Oslo, on 28 April 2009, organized by the Norwegian Research Council under its program “Gender Research.”


Notes

1. This last point was made by Squires at a conference held at Voksenåsen, Oslo, on 28 April 2009, organized by the Norwegian Research Council under its program on “Gender Research” (Kjønnsforskning in Norwegian).

2. For a comprehensive overview of women and international peacekeeping, see Olsson & Tryggestad (2001).

3. Eleven UN member-states (out of 192) have so far adopted action plans on the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325. These are Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. See http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/wps/ns/national_level_impl.html.

4. Source: http://www.nato.int/issues/women_nato/pcce Fem_soldiers_2007.pdf. The US figure was found on the homepage of the US Army and refers to the percentage of women in active service.


10. The paternity leave earmarked for fathers was increased from six to ten weeks as of 1 July 2009.
