

# Closing the Gender Gap in the Armed Forces:

*The Varying Success of Recruitment and Retention Strategies in Nato*

Since the late 1980s, a political goal of the Norwegian government has been to increase the number of women in the Norwegian Armed Forces (NAF). Nevertheless, growth has been slow and Norway is falling behind compared with other NATO countries. Despite being among the top four countries to establish initiatives for the recruitment and retention of women in military service, in Norway the armed forces are among the least successful of the NATO member countries in securing female personnel. Recruiting women at the national level serves to enlarge the pool from which female personnel are drawn for international operations. Thus, learning from countries that have been successful in maintaining a high number of women in their national force is essential if Norway is to secure a national pool of female personnel. However, success in recruiting and retaining women in the national force does not automatically reduce the gender gap in international missions. Trends in Norway suggest that different strategies must be used to target female candidates for international military service. □▷

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## Perspective on the Gender Gap

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (hereafter Resolution 1325) was adopted in October 2000. It recognizes the relevance of gender to peace and security matters, and requires each United Nations member-state to ensure the representation of women and incorporate gender perspectives at all levels of peace-building and conflict resolution. A central approach to implementing Resolution 1325 at the national level is increasing the number of women in the armed forces. Awareness of the role female military personnel may play in international operations is growing within the UN and NATO, which have developed strategies for promoting gender awareness. Today, however, the general guidelines specified by the UN and NATO carry commitments that are neither binding nor specifically accountable. Therefore, responsibility for implementing Resolution 1325 largely rests at the national level through both member-states' contributions to UN (or NATO) operations and bilateral peace initiatives.

Recognition of the role gender plays in international operations has led to some states specifying the recruitment of women to the armed forces as a strategy in National Action Plans (NAPs) for the implementation of Resolution 1325. Of NATO's 28 members-states, eight have so far developed NAPs (Belgium, Denmark, Iceland, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom). Only three of them specify increasing the number of women in the armed forces as a strategy towards implementation of Resolution 1325 (Belgium, Denmark and Norway). These same three states have been the least successful in actually recruiting women (see Figure 1).

*Why is Reducing the Gender Gap in the Armed Forces Important to Norway?* Reducing the gender gap in the Norwegian Armed Forces serves several purposes in relation to equal rights, representation, Norway's military reputation abroad and to maintaining national security through international military commitments. The national and international participation of women is inextricably linked in that the female deficit at the national level limits the pool of women available for international operations. Thus, as stated in the 2007 Brestrup report, failing to close the gender gap in the Norwegian Armed Forces may prevent Norway from becoming a leading force in the implementation of Resolution 1325 among NATO countries.

## Recruitment and Retention Strategies in NATO

The continued dominance of men at all levels of the national armed forces is common to all NATO member-states. With the exception of about 20 percent in random years among Eastern European states, the numbers from NATO show that only Canada and the United States have been able to exceed 15 percent female personnel in their national forces.

In a 2007 report on recruitment and retention of military personnel by Research Task Group HFM-107, NATO concluded that strategies for recruiting and retaining military personnel had to acknowledge demographic differences such as gender and race. From this perspective, closing the gender gap in the armed forces requires gender-sensitive strategies. Combined with recognition of the contribution of women in handling security issues in international operations, this prompted NATO to produce a list of recommendations on how each member-state could attract more women to their national forces. Recruitment strategies focus on the initial motivation for military service, and retention strategies are concerned with the decision to pursue a military career upon completing the initial appointment. Many strategies are closely associated and are characterized by the following:

- **Recruitment:** The aim of recruitment initiatives is to mitigate obstacles associated with the different physical capabilities of women and men; women are often under-informed about military career opportunities and their contribution is often disregarded.

- **Employment:** These initiatives seek to facilitate the integration of gender perspectives in the military workplace. Employment initiatives recognize that women face unique challenges in relation to child-bearing and child-rearing, and that these and other gender-specific challenges may be obstacles to a military career and are not always understood, nor even considered, in the military workplace.

- **Operational Planning and Operations:** Initiatives seeking to integrate gender perspectives in operational planning and operations are greatly influenced by NATO and its member-states' responsibilities and commitments to implement Resolution 1325 at all levels. These incentives further recognize that women have expertise that is not only unique but also needed to increase the effectiveness of operations.

- **Quality of Life:** Initiatives have to be taken into consideration that women often face career constraints associated with the ability to balance commitments between family and work. These initiatives recognize that a work environment dominated by men and based on a strong masculine culture poses challenges for female personnel that may have an effect on their ability to carry out assignments. Many of these initiatives assume that female and minority representation relate similarly to diversity concerns.

Typical of most strategies is seeking to guarantee equal opportunities and rights between women and men, whereas less attention is given to female personnel as providers of expertise and to specification of the areas in which their contribution are in demand. NATO's recommendations for reducing the gender gap in the armed forces have been implemented by member-states to varying degrees – the United States, Spain, Canada and Norway having implemented the greatest number of initiatives (see Figure 2).

A strong emphasis on strategies for reducing the gender gap in the armed forces is generally followed by higher levels of female personnel. Canada stands out as a leading example of success in combining incentives for recruiting and retaining women with the maintenance of high numbers of women in the Canadian Force. The origin of the Canadian emphasis on recruitment to the armed forces was personnel shortages during the early 1990s, and recruitment of women was a conscious effort to diversify. This stands in stark contrast to the Norwegian failure to meet

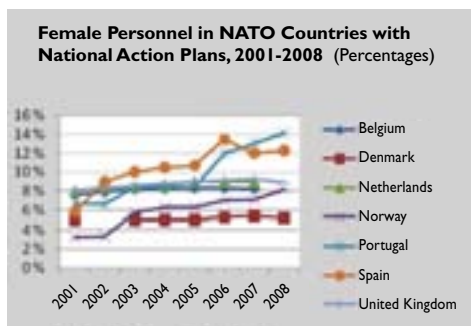


Figure 1

recruitment goals despite efforts to accommodate female personnel; in 2007, only 7.1 percent of Norwegian military personnel were women.

However, political efforts do not automatically lead to practical success and, conversely, favourable numbers are not always preceded by distinct recruitment and retention strategies. Some states have been successfully maintaining a high number of female personnel with only a weak emphasis on formal incentives. The United Kingdom, for example, achieved over 9 percent female representation solely by focusing on strategies aimed at retaining the women already serving. The British Ministry of Defence is currently reviewing the exclusion of women from ground combat roles, which, if revised, may affect future female participation in Britain. By replacing quotas for women with a mandatory one-day course preparing them for national defence, France has been able to maintain a relatively high percentage of women in its armed forces (14 percent in 2007) without necessarily giving priority to other recruitment and retention initiatives.

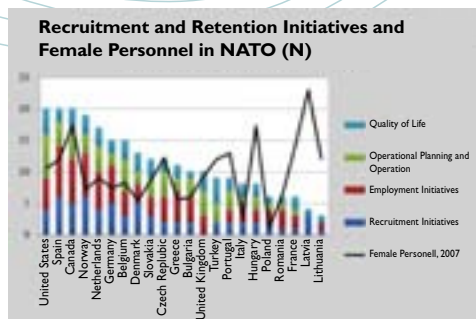


Figure 2

Common to the implementation of these incentives is that they are part of an ongoing process of recognizing the relevance of gender to conflict resolution and peace-keeping. Although the 10th anniversary of Resolution 1325 is being celebrated this year, awareness of the role that gender integration in the armed forces plays in the success of international operations is a much more recent development. Rendering theory into practice therefore takes time.

### Policy Relevance

*Can the National Force Serve as a Recruitment Basis for International Operations?* The national armed forces provide the basis for the recruitment of female personnel for international missions, but there is no automatic correspondence

between the numbers of women nationally and internationally. In Norway, three important trends illustrate this (see Figure 3):

1) The political goal of 15 percent female military personnel by 2008 has still not been reached, and the increase in the number of women completing military service has been slow and minor, suggesting that the long and strong focus on recruitment of women to the Norwegian Armed Forces has failed. Although modest, the growing number of women nationally suggests that the pool for recruiting women to international service is increasing.

2) The increasing percentage of women in Norway's international operations may suggest that the gender composition of the units is improving. This is important for unit cohesion and capability, but depends on an even distribution of women across missions and units.

3) At the same time, the actual number of women serving internationally is relatively stable, i.e. the increasing percentage of women in international missions is a result of an overall lower number of personnel. This means that the gender balance may be improving, but that women are not serving in international missions in greater numbers – a situation that may have implications for the ability of Norwegian troops to handle military responsibilities abroad. If Norway chooses to maintain involvement at today's level, the stagnated involvement of women is less problematic, but if it seeks to expand the number of troops abroad, these trends suggest that there will be a greater deficit of female personnel in the future. Internationally, the majority of female, and male, personnel are currently recruited in developing states with major societal gender inequalities, which means that states in Europe and North America will have to make greater efforts to increase their numbers if they are to be taken seriously as promoters of sustainable peace.

The growing number of Norwegian women serving in domestic forces as compared to the relatively stable number in international forces suggests that recruiting and retaining women nationally and internationally are two different processes.

*Lessons from Canada.* Given the national force's role as a recruitment pool for international service, Canada's success in reducing the gender gap may provide some insight for

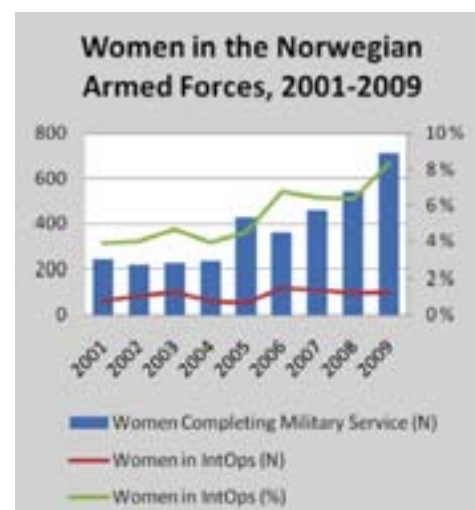


Figure 3

Norway. Canada and Norway share many of the same features, including the high priority given to the recruitment of women for military service. Both states are relatively small in terms of military capability; they maintain a strong focus on the humanitarian aspects of their military operations abroad, and have employed women extensively during crises and war. Similarly, Norway and Canada both have a strong social system and low unemployment rates. In spite of these similarities, Canada has pursued gender integration in the armed forces in ways that may provide lessons for Norway.

Comparison of recruitment and retention initiatives implemented in Canada and Norway shows that these countries have a similar focus on recruitment strategies. However, Canada practises several initiatives that are particularly relevant in retaining female personnel and which are lacking or are less emphasized in Norway:

1. A gender adviser is responsible for handling gender issues within the Canadian Force.
2. Measures and indicators utilized are evaluated annually.
3. Sex aggregated statistics are used for operational evaluation.
4. A policy of increasing the number of women in the national force is pursued as a way of increasing the recruitment pool for international service.
5. Equipment and clothing that fits the female body and needs are provided.
6. Material managers ensure that separate accommodations for female personnel are provided.

7. Education of all military personnel about the meaning, rights and responsibilities of gender equality is compulsory.

Also unique to Canada's success in maintaining a high level of female participation in the armed forces is the way recruitment and retention strategies operate in an increasingly competitive labour market. Rather than relying on conscription, researchers have suggested that the Canadian Force's pursuit of being an 'employer of choice' has been essential in the successful integration of gender. 'Employer of choice' refers to regarding the employees as the most valuable asset of a workplace and to developing strategies for accommodating personnel challenges. In other words, with this strategy it is assumed that practices which support the development of all employees and improve their quality of life will, in turn, bring about success in the recruitment and retention of women.

Researchers have noted that there are several reasons for the Scandinavian social and political setting appearing to be particularly conducive to a considerable increase in the number of women within its armed forces: The level of female participation in public and political life is high; the social discourse about gender is based on equal opportunities; and the discourse on family life emphasizes equal duties between men and women. In other words, we can expect to see more women serving in the Norwegian military. However, the composition of the Norwegian Armed Forces does not reflect Norwegian society, nor does it reflect the political objective of reducing the gender gap. Given the increasing role of the Norwegian Armed Forces as a professional force competing for labour in a market characterized by low unemployment rates and strong traditions of gender equality, recruitment strategies, as well as retention efforts, must present the Norwegian Armed Forces as an attractive employer for women.

#### THE AUTHOR

Anita Schjølset is a senior researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). Her main interests are: gender and the armed forces, and UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

#### Recommendations

If the gender gap is to be reduced in the Norwegian Armed Forces, policy-makers and the military forces have to acknowledge the important role women play in Norway's ability to implement directives from the UN and NATO and in the success of international operations. The following recommendations might further help address the problematic gender gap:

- Initiate a learning exchange programme with Canada. Although Canada and Norway have encountered many similar experiences relevant to the question of how to increase the number of women in the armed forces, Canada's recruitment and retention of female personnel has been much more successful than Norway's. This programme should also compare the internal distribution of women across ranks and assignments.
- Initiate a Nordic cooperation and exchange programme that systematically analyses the military in the Scandinavian/Nordic context. The programme could focus attention on how the Scandinavian context provides unique challenges to military recruitment and retention related to a high level of gender equality domestically and in the labour market, level of education and low unemployment rates.
- Initiate internal examination and facilitate research on the increasing inconsistency between the Norwegian Armed Forces and civilian society with respect to gender inequality and masculine culture. The examination could focus on how such a masculine military culture affects the recruitment and retention of women.
- Examine the role gender plays in increasing operational effectiveness. Although recruiting more women to the armed forces has been re-

ferred to as a strategy for increasing operational effectiveness in Norway, other states are motivated by personnel shortages. The examination should assess the effects of mixed-gender teams and of all-female units for team cohesion and operational effectiveness.

- Examine how women's experiences during national military service affect their motivation to serve internationally.
- Develop a best-practice report for Norway based on evaluation of NATO's incentives for reducing the gender gap, assess their relevance to Norway and reformulate them to specify tasks and responsibilities. ■

#### THE PROJECT

This policy brief was written with the support of the Norwegian Ministry of Defence for the project entitled 'NATO and the Women: Exploring the Gender Gap in the Armed Forces.' The full project report can be downloaded from: <http://www.prio.no/Research-and-Publications/Publication/?oid=58195705>

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