Norway: The New Norm Setter in Gender Integration Policy for the Armed Forces?
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Gender policy has become an increasingly prevalent issue within the Armed Forces across all states over the course of the last decade. States such as Canada, Israel, and even the United States have begun to re-think the way their armed forces perceive gender, seeing it as an asset rather than a hindrance. However, while certain states remain reluctant at the idea of women fully integrating their military corps, other states, such as Norway, have instituted policies that explicitly aim for full gender integration. The policies instituted by the Norwegian state over the last fifty years have showcased the advantages that come with having a fully integrated military force, and have not looked back. They have achieved their goals by instituting a three pronged initiative which centers on equalizing opportunity and risk for both men and women, challenging negative assumptions about women by facilitating interactions between male and female soldiers, as well as by recognizing the positive spill over effects for Norwegian society that come with a fully integrated military, which include creating more positive perceptions of women in the workplace at large and reducing remuneration inequalities between men and women.

Scholars often point to the adoption of the Military Occupational Equality policy of 1984 as the catalyst for Norway’s subsequent gender integration initiatives\(^1\). The 1984 motion by the Norwegian parliament allowed men and women equal access to all military positions on a volunteer basis, which was an important feat, considering that Belgium and the Netherlands were the only states to have ratified similar legislation beforehand\(^2\). Not only was this legislation innovative, but it was also a serious shift from the Armed Forces’ previous policies, whereby women were not even allowed to serve any role within the military, as per the Norwegian Parliament’s decision in 1953\(^3\).

While the 1984 policy decision was an important one, Norwegian officials have continued to institute legislation explicitly aimed at gender integration. Since then, Norway’s Armed Forces have not only become the first NATO country to draft women into the armed forces in 2014, but they have also instituted fully unisex rooms across the military at the same time\(^4\). While these policies may be raising eyebrows from other states, studies have shown that these policies have effectively rendered gender insignificant amongst soldiers within these unisex units\(^5\). Through extensive interviews and surveys, Norwegian officials and scholars alike have ascertained that these mixed gender rooms have solidified the team mentality within military units, and have shifted the focus from differences within the unit to the army itself as well as its specific operations\(^6\). Further to the point, to conscript women in the military is yet another significant shift in Norwegian military culture; Norwegian law stipulated for over 100 years (1897) that only men

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1 Frank Steder, ”Is it Possible to Increase the Share of Military Women in the Norwegian Armed Forces?” *International Relations and Diplomacy* 2,5 (2014): 293.
3 Ibid.
4 Gwladys Fouche, “Norway becomes first NATO country to draft women into the military,” Reuters, June 14, 2013.
7 Ibid.
were to serve on a mandatory basis in the military. Such a drastic shift in policy is centered on a deeply rooted sense of equality that permeates throughout Norwegian society. Interviews with 17 Norwegian Air Force conscripts revealed that almost all of them expressed that they saw this policy as being a natural extension of the egalitarian sentiments that existed outside the vacuum of military life.

While Norway’s latest military policies have led the way for other states to follow suit, the fact remains that the effects of gender integration have been felt among the Armed Forces for quite some time already. Interviews with Norwegian servicemen have shown that while the integration process can easily take at least ten years, men in the Armed Forces systematically reported preferring working in mixed gender units. Norwegian servicemen unilaterally stated that they not only recognized the contributions that women brought to the battlefield, but that they felt their units were less adequately prepared without them:

I guess I think you would definitely lose if you don’t include women in the military, but I don’t know it’s necessarily because it’s different than what men have. I think it’s just more people, as always, that brings a larger pool of skills to the organization. (A – 07)

Other institutions have experienced noticeably different results when living arrangements remained separate. The recruit education unit in the Royal Norwegian Navy has yet to institute unisex rooms, and studies have shown that there are some negative consequences to unit cohesion when this occurs. Respondents noticed the formation of a detrimental “us vs. them” mentality between the men and women in the unit, as well as a lack of consistent information dissemination between the two groups. While instances of harassment occurred in these separate living quarters, military members living in the unisex rooms noticed that the erasure of gender carried over to the absence of instances of harassment. It then seems that on an operational and cohesion level, that instituting unisex living arrangements for Norwegian military units has debunked many myths associated with such ideas. As of now, no other state has commissioned unisex bedrooms on a trial basis aside from Norway.

While it is important to underscore the policies that Norway has instituted and the ways in which they benefit the overall functioning of the military, it is also important to understand why Norway has taken so strongly to gender integration. Studies by MIT have plotted the collective intelligence of teams in a diverse array of fields, and found that the intelligence levels of groups systematically increased as the proportion of women in those groups rose. The study attributed this to women’s generally heightened sense of what they call “social sensitivity”.

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10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
whereby their ability to perceive and sense emotional changes leads to more collaborative patterns of group behaviour.\textsuperscript{17} It is easy to see how these skills can translate to often tense situations that occur out in the field.

Other studies conducted by RAND also reveal that women can help mitigate issues related to social cohesion, which can in turn enhance task cohesion.\textsuperscript{18} Not only is specific task cohesion important, but to mitigate issues related to social cohesion within the unit improves the performance of the team in the long run as well. Excessive social cohesion can not only create, but then reinforce and perpetuate negative group behaviours, all of which can easily be mitigated by introducing women into combat roles.

Norway has equally recognized that women are in fact physically capable of performing all military roles required of an infantry officer. Examples of women exercising physical prowess can be found in reports from a series of states, most notably the United States, and which roughly 1,800 combat badges being distributed to women in the U.S. Armed Forces alone corroborate\textsuperscript{19}. With regard to Norway, all women are required to undergo mandatory physical testing and perform the same tests as men, which include a form of aerobic exercise, push-ups, and pull-ups.\textsuperscript{20} While the results of these exercises have been “gendered”, it remains true that Norwegian forces have seen women meet, and more often than not, exceed the physical standards that the military establishes.\textsuperscript{21} Further, if women are capable of meeting the physical standards that have been set forward, the Norwegian military establishment deems that women are capable of fulfilling all the tasks required of a member of regular infantry, effectively deeming then fit to serve.\textsuperscript{22}

It would then make sense that Norwegian military officers now recognize the advantages of having women among their ranks, simply because the gender integration process started much earlier for them. As was mentioned above, the process can easily take ten years to reverse a military culture’s notion of gendered roles within the Armed Forces. However, as Norway has proven, once those norms are restructured, there is an imperative to include women and their diverse set of skills into military units. Not only that, but servicemen seemingly embrace the role that women play within their units. However, it may be too soon to draw any conclusions about the effects of such policies. As of 2015, roughly nine percent of women were active members of the Norwegian Armed Forces, and the government hopes that they can raise that number to roughly 20% by 2020. While the initial reports of these policies seem to bode well for things to come, we will still need to wait for a few years in order for these policies to firmly take root before drawing any significant conclusions.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. 28.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid 30.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid 32.
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