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How Can the United States Move toward Gender-Neutral Special Forces?

Lessons from the Norwegian Military

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Abstract: Militaries serve as cornerstones of many nations, and often behaviors within these militaries are reflected in society, and vice-versa. This article discusses key instances of female soldiers serving in the U.S. military and, more specifically, U.S. special operations forces. Team Lioness, Female Engagement Teams (FETs), and Cultural Support Teams (CSTs) have demonstrated not only that women are capable of serving in frontline roles but also that there exists a need for them to serve in those roles. This leads to an examination of whether a separate system of training and education for female soldiers could add value to the U.S. military's current training systems. This article also takes a close look at the Norwegian Special Operations Forces all-female unit *Jegertroppen*, or Hunter Troop, to assess its advantages and drawbacks. The article concludes that despite some

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drawbacks regarding long-term deployment, the Jegertroppen program confirms the advantages of a separate system of training and education for female soldiers that could perhaps benefit the U.S. military.

Keywords: United States, Norway, military service, women, female soldiers, gender equality, gender-neutral military, gender-neutral armed forces, special operations

There is a vast amount of literature that discusses whether women are physically strong enough to join the armed forces, as well as the challenges that sexual attraction present to various militaries. Retired generals who have trained in traditionally male-dominated environments often oppose the integration of female soldiers into combat units, believing that women can be a distraction to male soldiers, which can be fatal in battle. Women can also be seen as a threat to male soldiers' masculinity, creating a new set of challenges. As one U.S. servicemember stated, women cannot be in the infantry "because it undermines masculine motivations for combat: the main reason [male soldiers] fight is to be tough and therefore attract more women."¹ Nonetheless, the ending of compulsory military service and the general liberation of women in society have impacted the way people think about the female soldier.² Integrating women into the armed forces is not just part of the gender equality discussion—it is also a matter for the national defense agenda. It is, therefore, more advantageous to concentrate on how military institutions can benefit from female soldiers rather than

debate whether women should be allowed access to those militaries in the first place.

This article will look at gender integration in the U.S. military from a historical perspective and discuss whether the United States can successfully build gender-neutral armed forces. It will also examine and critique the Norwegian model, including initiatives that the Norwegian government has created to achieve gender neutrality in its own military. The article will conclude that while the U.S. military has already taken steps to address gender integration, it requires stronger governance structures to ensure that such integration is completed at all levels. By adopting some of the Norwegian initiatives examined herein, the United States can become the first nation to fully complete gender integration and possess a gender-neutral military force.

Defining Gender-Neutral Armed Forces and Addressing the Gaps

This article will examine whether women's incorporation into the armed forces can lead to a gender-neutral military. In this context, *gender-neutral military* refers to a military in which women are so embedded into the different divisions of a nation's army, navy, and air force, including at general officer and flag ranks, that the emphasis is shifted to women's abilities and skills rather than their gender. Through examinations of the United States and Norway, it is evident that possessing a gender-neutral military means more than just integrating women into a male-dominated field.

A truly diverse military force must incorporate all marginalized groups that have been denied access due to a particular characteristic, including

gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender reassignment.³

Incorporating diverse groups can prove that when emphasis is given to an individual's skill and ability rather than their protected characteristic, the cohort of capable trainees increases. However, the examination of all marginalized groups is a colossal task that requires the unravelling of many layers and takes focus away from the examination of gender integration, which is the primary aim of this article. Therefore, the article looks at one particular group—women—and how its inclusion in the armed forces offers the first step toward building a fully gender-neutral military.

An Introduction to Women in the U.S. Armed Forces

Women have a long history of fighting alongside their male compatriots on the battlefield, but it has taken many decades for women to officially be accepted as soldiers. In the United States, women began joining the military in an official capacity during World War I (1914–18). More than 35,000 women served in the U.S. military during the war, and several hundred lost their lives.⁴ By the time of World War II (1939–45), women had access to more military jobs, serving as pilots, drivers, and mechanics as well as in more traditional supporting roles such as nurses. Their contributions during the war created the right political and social conditions that led to the establishment of the Women's Armed Services Integration Act of 1948, which allowed women to serve as permanent members of the armed forces (albeit in an auxiliary, noncombat status). For the first time, women were recognized as full members of the U.S. military, and they could consequently claim benefits.⁵

The post-Vietnam War era brought more substantial changes, as the U.S. military decided to allow women into its Service academies.⁶ In the 1990s, female pilots earned the right to fly combat missions, due to U.S. secretary of defense Les Aspin Jr.'s 1994 Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule, which rescinded the "risk rule."⁷ By the end of the decade, women were serving on combat ships and flying warplanes from U.S. aircraft carriers.

Despite few significant changes for almost two decades, female soldiers still deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan during the Global War on Terrorism (2001–present) to support all-male combat units. Female support teams, like the one known as "Team Lioness," were units comprised of clerks, mechanics, and engineers who fought alongside U.S. Marines in some of the bloodiest battles in Iraq.⁸ Additionally, Female Engagement Teams (FETs) were established by the U.S. Marine Corps in 2002–3, and Cultural Support Teams (CSTs) were created by the U.S. Special Operations Command in 2009. CSTs are comprised of volunteer female members whose job is to develop trust-based relationships with the Afghan women they encounter on patrols. Having such teams at their disposal has helped U.S. forces better reach out to the Afghan population.⁹ Team Lioness, FETs, and CSTs are some of the most recent examples of the contributions of women in the U.S. armed forces during wartime.

In January 2013, U.S. secretary of defense Leon E. Panetta lifted the ban on women entering combat roles and gave the military two years to complete the integration process.¹⁰ This allowed two women to complete the elite U.S. Army Ranger School program, which consists of combat leadership training, in 2015. It also gave women access to more

opportunities in the armed forces as well as the chance to reach the highest ranks of military leadership.

Limitations

These progressive steps in the U.S. military throughout history have not been without shortcomings. For example, recruiting women into the Army seemed to be at odds with social trends of the 1940s and 1950s. While women were recruited during those decades, they were limited to clerical and noncombat roles, as the ideals for women that prevailed at the time were those of domesticity and maternalism.¹¹ When the Korean War (1950–53) broke out, women were called to join the U.S. military due to lack of personnel. However, as a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs report notes, “from the mid-1940s to the early 1970s, women continued to be restricted to two percent of the military population.”¹² As a result, even though the proportion of women in the U.S. military increased between 1948 and 1953, women’s long-term service in the armed forces declined until that 2-percent restriction was lifted in 1967.¹³

Similarly, the Team Lioness experiment that took place in the early 2000s proved not only the need for female soldiers in combat roles but also their ability to support male troops. However, many of their contributions on the front lines were not as widely recognized as those of their male counterparts, since women were not technically allowed in combat roles. Similarly, while the employment of FETs and CSTs demonstrate that the idea of female special operators is not new, the stories and contributions of those teams are rarely known or written about. Moreover, as Frank Brundtland Steder and Nina Rones point out, “many of those women have

been put in service without operational training before deployment and operations.”¹⁴ Therefore, given the contribution of women in the U.S. military, especially in special operations, it can be said that what it is missing from the military environment is the establishment of a robust education and training system that ensures equal access to special operations roles for female soldiers, as well as proper recognition for their contributions through appropriate documentation of both their struggles and successes.

Overall, the historic perspective of the U.S. armed forces shows that steady progressive steps have been taken regarding women’s accession into the military. However, the U.S. military is not gender-neutral, since it still needs to better govern the integration of female soldiers and support units. Drawing from these progressive steps, the United States can enhance the education and training of female soldiers as well as proper recognition of their achievements through rightful promotion opportunities. For this to take place, the U.S. military needs to adopt a consistent approach in recognizing how women have supported military missions in the past, how women can contribute more effectively to future missions, and how the military itself can provide the necessary training, supporting facilities, and better access to healthcare benefits. This would ensure that the U.S. military is a fair and effective institution that focuses on excellence and effectiveness, qualities that signal its transition to a truly gender-neutral armed force.

Looking to Norway

As media coverage indicates, Norway is considered a progressive nation in providing appropriate training for female soldiers through its establishment

of all-female and gender-neutral units as well as conscription initiatives.¹⁵ This section will look at such initiatives and whether there are any lessons to be learned in the United States. Peter Viggo Jakobsen and Sten Rynning argue that territorially small states with strong Western alliances tend to not innovate, but rather emulate and adapt, since their primary security goal is to prevent being abandoned by their allies. Hence, most small states offer military niche capabilities that meet the alliances' demands.¹⁶ Although Norway fits into this category, it has followed a unique approach by adding an international dimension to its defense goals. Norway has promoted United Nations (UN) Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Committee on Gender Perspectives and helped with its implementation through a NATO working group on women in combat.¹⁷ In other words, Norway is an advocate of gender equality in the armed forces, and it has been actively trying to reinforce that equality on an international scale.

Specifically, Norway is considered a pioneer in gender integration in the military because it conducted a practical experiment with the creation of *Jegertruppen*, the world's only all-female special operations force, in 2014. Norway has also added an international approach to its gender equality efforts with UN Resolution 1325, which made women's security a core element of the UN's normative agenda. While passing the resolution required lobbying by international women's organizations and diplomatic efforts of UN member states, Norway's contribution was so prominent that it became a leader in the international arena. Norway's ability to assume such an important role was made possible due to it being perceived and accepted by other state actors as a neutral agent with no hidden geopolitical

agenda.¹⁸ Indeed, not all countries would be able to engage and promote such a cause internationally. Perceptions of Norway's neutrality and relatively independent status have allowed its government to enter into a dialogue with other countries that may have been skeptical of or indifferent to liberal normative agendas such as Women, Peace, and Security (WPS), allowing Norway to shape the agenda of one the most influential international organizations.

Norway has not only influenced the UN agenda but also strengthened it by contributing to the establishment of the Nordic Centre for Gender in Military Operations in 2012. This organization aims to engage with military actors to enhance work regarding WPS. Norway has also played a pivotal role in establishing the NATO post of special representative for WPS, with its own diplomat Mari Skåre serving as the inaugural secretary general. Although the WPS agenda is not directly related to women in the armed forces, it deals with women's contribution during times of both war and peace. These examples prove that Norway continually tries to "attack" the issue of women's integration from multiple angles that include reassessing women's national and international contributions.

An Introduction to Women in the Norwegian Armed Forces

Women have a long history of serving in the Norwegian armed forces on a voluntary basis. During World War II, they served both as officers and in the enlisted ranks. Between 1977 and 1984, Norwegian women were given access to noncombat military appointments. In 1985, the Norwegian parliament, Storting, decided that the law of equal opportunity should also apply to the military, making all military roles, including combat, available to

women.¹⁹ The Norwegian government has worked to increase the number of women in its armed forces by lifting gender restrictions and introducing various initiatives to attract female recruits.²⁰ For example, female soldiers only need to sign a binding contract after they have completed their first three months of military service to ensure that they are able to commit both physically and mentally to the tasks ahead.²¹ Joining a male-dominated field with training typically designed for men can be daunting, so the nonbinding nature of joining the armed forces allows women a trial period before committing to the military and its principles. Such initiatives may explain why Norway was one of the first countries to welcome its first female helicopter pilot, jet fighter pilot, and submarine commander in the early 1990s.²²

Norway's history of incorporating women into its armed forces continued with the introduction of universal conscription (draft) in March 2016, which saw several hundred 19-year-old Norwegian women put on military uniforms.²³ As Reuven Gal and Frederick J. Manning point out, universal conscription enhances the relationship between the military and society because it creates a perception of burden-sharing that is a defining factor for morale.²⁴ Ultimately, the idea of universal conscription goes back to the Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacque Rousseau's principle of the "social contract" and its effect on equality of citizenship.²⁵

Universal conscription is popular with territorially small states because it emphasizes the equality of citizenship. It also explains people's decision to give up some of their own power and individuality to perform public duties or bear arms in order to enjoy the fruits of security and prosperity within their societies. Matthew Kosnik notes that conscription in

territorially small states is a useful defense tool because it allows conscripts to be used for specific domestic goals.²⁶ For Norway, that goal is to carry out territorial defense and border security. To put it differently, universal conscription reinforces territorial presence, which is critical to ensuring continuous national control.²⁷ The draft also addresses shortages in military personnel. Norway has a small population of around 5.2 million, with its urban population aging rapidly, so the small number of young people who are qualified to join the armed forces creates an additional challenge for Norway's military force. Conscription solves this problem through the buildup of Norway's military reserves.²⁸

The Norwegian experimental unit *Jegertroppen*, or Hunter Troop, was first launched in 2014.²⁹ It is a special forces unit designed to educate and train female soldiers to continue in combat roles in the Norwegian Special Operations Forces or to be deployed abroad to assist with training female special police in Afghanistan.³⁰ Norwegian military leaders believed that designing a unit just for women would ensure that female soldiers were competing against other women who had similar physical and operational capabilities.³¹ The motivation behind the creation of *Jegertroppen* derived from the Global War on Terrorism, during which Norwegian forces realized that traditional male special forces could not engage with Afghan women due to cultural obstacles that did not allow Afghan women and children to interact with male soldiers.³² To mitigate this challenge, Norway launched the *Jegertroppen* experiment to increase the number of women deployed abroad.

One of the reasons that *Jegertroppen* has received international recognition as a groundbreaking military formation is that its standards for

female soldiers are very similar to all-male units, with the only significant difference being that male soldiers typically carry a minimum of 88-pound packs, while female soldiers carry 60-pound packs. Jegertroppen forces train in arctic survival skills, counterterrorism operations, urban warfare, long-range patrolling, and hand-to-hand combat, just as their male counterparts do.³³ Importantly, Jegertroppen breaks numerous social and cultural beliefs that women cannot be trained to the same standards as men, allowing women to be seen in a different light and as part of a sector that has been male-dominated for centuries.

Limitations

It is important to note that although Norway has been praised by international media outlets for its forward-thinking stance regarding gender equality in the military, and that Jegertroppen has been recognized as a successful project, there are nevertheless several limitations that exist. Norwegian platoon commanders have stated that Jegertroppen is a success because it has enabled female soldiers to become skilled. However, there is not enough evidence of Jegertroppen troops being deployed abroad to prove this on a large scale. Steder and Rones explain that this has been a substantial obstacle, as Jegertroppen often finds few opportunities to engage in special operations missions.³⁴ Furthermore, Jegertroppen was created on the basis that women would thrive when trained in all-female units, which contradicts Norway's decision to introduce universal conscription and create mixed-gender platoons, training opportunities, and residential quarters.³⁵

Although the Norwegian Ministry of Defence portrayed its universal conscription law as a step forward for gender equality, the Norwegian Association for Women's Rights (*Norsk Kvinnesaksforening*, or NFK) does not share the same view.³⁶ According to Torild Skard, the NFK's opposition to female conscription stems from its view that such conscription is a sign of militarism rather than a victory for gender equality. The NFK believes that female conscription is unnecessary in a state in which women already have the same rights and opportunities as men. Making conscription compulsory does not achieve a better and stronger military; in fact, it creates "a misunderstanding of the concept of gender equality and the intentions of the Law on Equality."³⁷ While the NFK is a prominent advocacy group for women's rights, the Norwegian Ministry of Defence did not consult it on universal conscription.

The reason these limitations are acknowledged here is to show that the Norwegian example is not perfect and still relatively underdevelopment. Further research is needed regarding the retainment of Jegertroppen personnel, their deployment on international operations, and their long-term impact on Norway's armed forces. Similarly, universal conscription appears fascinating from the outside, but the Norwegian Ministry of Defence's decision to not consult with the NFK on the subject of conscripting women begs the question as to whether its actions signified a genuine effort toward gender equality or were simply a move toward militarizing women.³⁸ Nevertheless, Jegertroppen's imperfections should not overshadow its uniqueness and potential for gender equality, especially since it creates all-female special forces rather than female support units for all-male special

forces. Recognizing its limitations early on allows its potential to be more fully understood.

In addition, Norway has not only allowed its women to join the armed forces but also created mixed-gender combat units, which further increases the presence of women in the military. For example, a Norwegian air defense battalion of the 138th Air Wing was 50-percent female in 2015.³⁹ Norway continuously challenges itself by creating experimental units that showcase its willingness to engage a more significant portion of the female population. This also demonstrates that even though a trend might not be as popular in neighbouring countries—as, for example, most countries shift away from conscription—Norway is not afraid to trial new initiatives.⁴⁰

Overall, Norway's military has taken major steps to enhance gender equality and create an educational model that other countries can follow. The Norwegian example demonstrates that creating a culture of acceptance can attract female recruits. Whereas militaries that are resistant to laws promoting women's participation in the armed forces discourage capable recruits, militaries that are open to achieving gender equality within the ranks and that recruit both men and women can benefit from a wider pool of talent.

What Can the United States Learn from the Norwegian Example?

Both the United States and Norway have a long history of incorporating women into the armed forces. Norway's efforts have been accompanied by several practical experiments, including Jegertroppen and the mixed-gender air defense battalion mentioned above. The United States has taken steps to address similar issues, but what seems missing is a willingness to view the

female soldier as an agent that can be equally effective on the battlefield when the right training is provided. The term *right training* refers to training and education that allows female soldiers to utilize their own skills and abilities to excel rather than feel compelled to adopt masculine traits in an attempt to be accepted in an “all-boys club.”⁴¹

While the U.S. military has created female support units such as Team Lioness and FETs to address concerns regarding gender integration, Norway has successfully established Jegertroppen, the world’s first all-female special forces unit. Even though Norway has not employed Jegertroppen recruits consistently, it is impressive that it has been able to successfully train female recruits, who have been repeatedly accused of not having the stamina or physical ability to perform as well as their male counterparts. In other words, the major difference between Jegertroppen and female support units is that Jegertroppen was created specifically to allow women to serve as special force operators. These female soldiers are vigorously trained to the same standards as male soldiers, which allows them to pursue a number of roles during or after combat operations. U.S. units such as FETs, notwithstanding their valuable contributions and impeccable performances, were created for a specific role and dismantled after that role was fulfilled. The Norwegian example can serve as inspiration to the United States by demonstrating that women can serve in special force units when the right environment is created and equal opportunities are available. Jegertroppen has established a new set of standards, confirming that just because something has not been done in the past does not mean it is not plausible today. The United States, being the superpower it is, should endeavor to create its own version of this initiative.

Norway has also assumed a significant role in enhancing the international agenda on WPS due to its perceived neutral status in the global community. Although the United States is not as easily perceived as a neutral agent, it can find ways to contribute to that agenda, as well. For example, the U.S. military could establish a joint program with the Norwegian armed forces in which emphasis is given to tackling issues of discrimination, harassment, and inequality of opportunity for women. A more active role would help make U.S. efforts regarding women's participation in the military more prominent, establishing foundations for an environment where women can thrive in a male-dominated sector. There is much to be learned from the Norwegian experiments in establishing a gender-neutral military force, which have introduced new ways of training female soldiers that challenge social perceptions of women being effective in a traditionally male-dominated institution.

Conclusions and Next Steps

This article has provided a foundation regarding the importance of integrating women into special force units and how doing so can lead to the establishment of a gender-neutral military force. It has also touched on the military histories of the United States and Norway, exploring how both countries have tried over the years to integrate female soldiers into their militaries through female support units as well as mixed-gender and all-female units. The article concludes that examining and understanding gender equality and integration is a step in the right direction. It also recognizes the need for a more focused examination of the history of the U.S. military as an institution as well as the significance of contributions by

marginalized groups such as women to military operations. Doing so can help armed forces utilize their resources as holistically as possible, since they will not halt the progress of gifted individuals based on whether they have a protected characteristic. Western powers such as the United States will consequently be offered an opportunity to not only boost their military effectiveness but also elevate the experiences of their soldiers. Therefore, the next step to be taken should be to closely examine the significance of “equal citizenship” and how it translates into a military context, as well as how gender integration can lead to the establishment of a truly gender-neutral military force.

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