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Changing views on gender and security: Finland’s belated opening of military service to women in the 1990s

Anders Ahlbäck

Department of History, Stockholm University, Sweden

ABSTRACT
This article studies the historical shift in societal understandings of gender and security in Finland that led to the introduction of women’s voluntary military service and the opening of the military professions to women in 1995. With a focus on how the gendered division of defence and military labour was conceptualized at various stages, the study analyses what caused Finland to lag behind its Scandinavian neighbours in this respect, and what caused a sweeping reform process to come about in the early 1990s. Drawing on press materials, parliamentary records and policymaking documents, it traces public debates and policymaking over two decades. It shows that women’s defence work was a controversial issue, for both historical and political reasons. This caused an emphasis being placed on women’s non-military tasks within a broad understanding of societal security during the 1980s. Around the end of the Cold War, a surge of neo-patriotism coincided with the normalization of formal gender equality to effect a significant shift in notions of female citizenship towards military participation. Positive Scandinavian examples of women’s military integration were decisive at this point, as was the political impact of Finland acquiring its first female minister of defence.

Introduction

It is a common understanding that perceptions of the significance of national security were transformed in the Nordic countries in the decades following the end of the Cold War. Traditional security thinking, focussed on the potential for armed conflicts and territorial military defence, was replaced by more holistic notions of security, resilience and crisis management, as well as broader understandings of what constituted threats to societal security. This chronology, however, does not apply as straightforwardly if we the take into account the tasks and positions assigned to women in the gendered division of security and defence work. The process towards opening military service to women that took place in Finland is an interesting case in point. Perceptions of what Finnish women’s contributions to security work should be moved away from being confined to societal crisis management in the early to mid-1990s, towards a new emphasis on women’s integration into traditional military defence work.
The chronology of women’s military integration in Finland is all the more intriguing since Finland lagged some twenty years behind its Scandinavian neighbours in this respect. The Danish armed forces started gradually admitting women to military positions in 1962; the political process to prepare for admitting women on equal terms started in Sweden in 1969, and in Norway in 1970. Yet only in 1991 was a similar policy reform initiated in Finland. Since Finland otherwise kept neck and neck with Scandinavia in terms of welfare and gender equality reforms during the 1970s, the complete lack of forward movement concerning women in the military stands out as conspicuous. Once set in motion, however, the reform work was carried out swiftly as compared with the more gradual policy processes in Scandinavia. A full opening up of military positions to women, without any exceptions for combat units or special branches, was only implemented in Norway in 1985, in Sweden in 1989 and in Denmark in 1992. Finland caught up with a sweeping reform in 1995, which aligned closely with the Swedish and Norwegian models for women’s military participation.

This article studies the changing societal understandings of gender and security in Finland which underlay and enabled first the stand-still during the 1980s and then the relatively rapid shift that led to the introduction of women’s voluntary military service and an opening up of the military professions to women in 1995. It follows the public debate on women’s military participation from the early 1980s, analysing the belief systems surrounding the gendered division of defence and military labour, as well as tracing the societal forces and actors that promoted or contested change. How should the divergent chronology of women’s military inclusion in Finland, when compared to the other Nordic countries, best be understood and explained? What factors counter-acted change in the 1980s and what caused the shift to come about so abruptly in the early 1990s?

In order to bring into view the wide range of military and defence tasks historically performed by women, it is relevant to broadly consider activities related to warfare and militaries as forms of military labour. Building on a feminist understanding of the concept of labour, the Swedish economic historian Fia Sundevall has expanded this to include various forms of military labour. She points out that studies of what she refers to as ‘the gendered division of military labour’ must take into account both paid and unpaid work, including, for example, women’s voluntary defence work as well as men’s coerced military service. Since Finnish sources from the 1970s and 1980s made a point of including women in tasks supporting national defence and societal security, but expressly excluded them from what contemporaries understood as ‘military tasks’, I nonetheless use the term ‘defence work’ for work that was not awarded military status.

The gendered division of military labour is part of, and intertwined with, the complex social and cultural constructions of differences between women’s and men’s tasks that permeate society, as shown in a number of influential gender-historical studies. In the Nordic context of armed forces based on universal male conscription and strong links between male citizenship and military service, it is useful to analyse the gendered division of labour from such a broad societal perspective, rather than, for example, the perspective of organizational sociology. In the following analysis, this is done by identifying the most influential conceptualizations of women’s defence and military labour and how they have changed over time.
The debate on women’s military participation in Finland has recently been studied with a similar focus on the ‘total social organisation of labour’ by Linda Hart and Teemu Tallberg. They analyse all major state committee reports on the subject from 1948 until 1993, depicting the strong continuities of the 1960s–1980s and the shift in the 1990s, yet leaving the reasons for this shift uninterrogated. In a 1999 article the political scientist Anne-Maria Holli analysed the understandings of gender equality that surfaced in the parliamentary debates over women’s access to Finnish UN peacekeeping troops in 1984 and military training and military careers in 1994–1995. I build on these previous analyses, yet I historicize the public debates more thoroughly than either Holli or Hart & Tallberg. Using a wider set of different source materials, this study thus traces the incremental steps, the agency of key groups and actors, as well as cultural and geopolitical changes that can be argued to have brought about the historic shift.

International comparative studies have pointed to a complex of factors affecting women’s military roles in modern societies. In general, the level of women’s military participation has been shown to correlate with a lack of male labour, a high level of qualified female participation in the labour force, egalitarian gender policies putting external pressure on the military, as well as military developments towards all-volunteer forces, peacekeeping missions and use of advanced military technology. Previous research into the processes that led to the opening of military service to women in Denmark, Sweden and Norway has emphasized in particular the interplay between military recruitment needs, changing gender structures in the labour market and emerging political ideologies of gender equality. The integration of women into the military in these countries was initially, through the 1950s and 1960s, driven by personnel shortages and concerns about shrinking male cohorts. The economic boom of the period led to a general scarcity of labour that furthered women’s inroads into formerly male-only professions. The military recruited female volunteers into an expanding range of support and technical services, which gave rise to a range of practical issues that called attention to the status of these women already present within the forces.

During the 1970s, the increasing significance of gender equality issues in Scandinavian societies shifted the policy focus towards women’s rights to work and make a career in the armed forces. The armed forces acknowledged a need for more women in non-combat tasks, yet recoiled when political proposals for granting women full military status were tabled. Denmark (1971) and Norway (1976) initially opted for opening only non-combat positions to women and creating separate training tracks for women. In Sweden, however, an almost unanimous parliament in 1978 decided to gradually open all military positions to women and integrate female volunteers into the male conscript training units. Analysing the forces behind this internationally unprecedented step, Fia Sundevall has pointed to the Swedish self-image of being ‘the world’s most gender-equal society’, as well as the pressure from women’s rights and women’s voluntary defence organizations.

These Scandinavian developments, closely followed in Finland, point to some further sub-questions that may clarify Finland’s divergence. What was the relationship between military recruitment needs and the political motives surrounding the integration of women into the military in Finland? What roles did the military leadership, political parties, women’s associations, and other interest groups play in the process? Did the issue continue to be discussed mainly in terms of women’s rights in the public labour market, or did other moral, economic or military aspects become significant?
This study follows the main conflict lines and major shifts in public debate and policymaking in roughly chronological order. The source materials have been selected to trace arguments used and attitudes displayed in public among key interest groups and policymakers. Any documentation pertaining to possible policy processes internal to the Armed Forces or Ministry of Defence that were never published or mentioned in public have thus not been searched out. Central sources displaying official policymaking and mainstream thinking comprise five state committee reports on women, defence and security policy matters from 1966, 1970, 1986, 1992 and 1993, including the archive of the pivotal 1993 committee. A selection of press articles, collected in digitized press archives using combinations of search words such as ‘women’, ‘conscription’ and ‘military service’, has been used to outline public attitudes before the actual reform process started in 1991.11 Two parliamentary readings have been analysed: the 1984 debate on allowing women into Finnish peacekeeping forces in 1984 and the 1994–1995 debate on voluntary military service for women. The complex yet decisive agency of Defence Minister Elisabeth Rehn has been studied through her public speeches as well as press interviews in the government archives. The memoirs of Elisabeth Rehn, the 1993 committee chair Kaarina Buure Hägglund, and the Chief of the Defence Command in 1990–1994, General Gustav Hägglund, have been used for supplementary information on the decision-making process.

Women’s service twice undesired: Finlandization and feminism in the 1980s

There were only sporadic public discussions on women’s military service in Finland before 1990 and no political party or civic organization had the matter on its agenda. One evident reason was the peculiarly politicized memory of Finnish women’s defence work during the Second World War. In Sweden and Norway, organizations for women’s voluntary military labour played a significant role in expediting the opening of military positions to women during the 1970s.12 In Finland, however, the corresponding organization for women’s voluntary defence work, Lotta Svärd, had been prohibited as part of the armistice conditions dictated by the Soviet Union in 1944. Around 200,000 Finnish women had contributed to the war effort within the organization. In postwar Finland, Soviet-friendly leftist groups threw suspicion on their motives by associating Lotta Svärd with the militarist and ultra-nationalist anti-communism that they claimed had permeated ‘white’ patriotic organizations in interwar Finland. Moreover, some of the most widely-read war novels of the 1950s and 1960s used fictionalized images of the Lottas as targets for their critique of the nationalist values of interwar society, portraying them as licentious adventuresses. In the 1960s and 1970s, this sexualized and politicized memory of Lotta Svärd coincided with strong leftist currents in cultural life and a marked wariness of the Soviet Union – known as ‘Finlandization’ – that characterized Finland’s Cold War decades.13 As a result, anything that could be perceived as a ‘re-militarisation’ of Finnish women was rendered politically inflammable.

Ironically, another legacy of the Second World War was that the Finnish armed forces enjoyed relatively strong popular support during the Cold War. Male military service within the conscript army was strongly identified with nationalistic constructions of Finnish masculinity. As Finland, unlike its economically more prosperous Scandinavian neighbours, saw no labour shortages and remained a country of net labour emigration
until the 1970s there was no particular military need for the recruitment of women. The armed forces were stretched rather for money than for manpower. Due to the politics of Finlandization, as well as the central position of the traditionally anti-militarist social democratic party in the government coalitions of the 1970s and 1980s, allocations for national defence were restrictive.

The possibility of women entering military service was brought up only in scattered writings in the Finnish press in the 1970s, obviously inspired by the contemporary reforms taking place in the Scandinavian countries. In 1980, Defence Minister Lasse Åikäs aired some thoughts on enlisting women to non-combat military positions, pointing to shrinking male cohorts and possible future shortages of male personnel. The year after, the chief of the Finnish Air Force, Rauno Meriö, suggested in a press interview that a limited number of female volunteers could be given both military and officer training, including weapons training ‘for self-defence purposes’. Both Åikäs and Meriö had only auxiliary tasks in mind, such as air surveillance, medical services or office tasks. Still, several Finnish politicians, including the President of the Republic, Urho Kekkonen, as well as feminist organizations, swiftly repudiated the notion of any weapons training or military service for women. Asked for comments by the press, military leaders stated that more women were certainly welcome in the armed forces, but only within the realm of tasks of a civilian nature and in order to ‘release’ male employees for combat positions. They assured the public that the armed forces had no intention of giving women military training or opening military service to women.

Apart from some supportive press editorials, the initiatives by Åikäs and Meriö in 1980–81 sparked no sustained debate or concrete actions. In the societal, political and military mainstream thinking in Finland during the early to mid-1980s, national defence work was conceived of as a spectrum of different tasks entailing a markedly gendered division of labour. In the conservative view, women’s contributions to national defence were predominantly understood as a matter of civic, patriotic and gendered duty, rather than an issue of women’s rights. The issue at hand was how women best could serve the common good in a national crisis. Women were thus expected to participate in ‘total defence’ – a comprehensive policy framework, which included both economic and territorial defence preparedness – yet only in clearly demarcated non-military tasks. In addition to women maintaining economic production and other aspects of civilian society in a future crisis, the areas of military labour pointed out as most suitable for women were administration, medical services, civil defence, and systems of transportation and communication, as well as air surveillance. Their physical ability was not considered to be equal to combat positions.

Based on the premise that women must be excluded from any use of weapons and armed discourses on women’s defence work came to emphasize conceptualizations of security that went beyond the purely military sphere. For instance, a 1970 state committee report on women’s participation in national security-related matters underlined that meeting any kind of national crisis would always involve ‘the natural areas of activity for women, mainly various tasks related to care and maintenance’. Even if large-scale military conflict was the default threat scenario, this report pointed to new threats related to the rapid development of technology, such as major marine oil spills or nuclear accidents. This was also the main difference between the findings of this committee, which had a female
majority, and a somewhat earlier, all-male committee, whose 1966 report suggested obliging women to perform auxiliary, non-military tasks in case of a national emergency. Whereas the 1966 report considered only armed external threats, the 1970 report conceptualized national security more broadly. The concrete suggestions of these two committees nonetheless dovetailed, as they both called for institutionalizing the education and coordination of female labour to take over tasks, ‘where male manpower will be insufficient’ during a crisis: non-combat functions within the armed forces, civil defence, medical services, emergency accommodation and feeding of evacuees and so on.23

In 1986, another state committee, consisting of prominent female politicians and academics, pointed to several ways of promoting a special ‘female perspective’ on security policy. This entailed broadening the notion of national defence to encompass the promotion of peace as well as being prepared for non-military national crises such as major disasters or economic calamities. The committee report related women’s role in promoting security in this broader sense to their role as educators in homes, kindergartens and schools, fostering a spirit of humanity, solidarity and internationalism among the young. It was stressed that the security work done within peace education and international organizations, as well as diplomacy and foreign policy, was not in any conflict with military defence as a last resort. Both men and women should be able to perform civic work for national security in a manner suiting each individual’s values and mode of action. However, a line was drawn at women taking up arms or performing military service, which the report dismissed as both unnecessary and ‘alien to our society’.24

This attempt to strike a balance between defence and peace work demonstrates that the traditionally gendered division of defence work in mid-1980s Finland was not yet being significantly challenged by any demands for women’s rights to military work. The feminist movement was the main counterforce to the mainstream view of women as duty-bound to assist national defence in auxiliary tasks. The feminists, however, vehemently opposed any increase in women’s involvement in military defence. Within the new women’s movement, which gained ground in Finland in the late 1970s, war and violence were seen as by-products of the destructive forms of power politics which are pursued by men. Feminist activism put a new emphasis on gender difference, women’s specificity and female rationality. ‘Equality feminism’ was criticized for only adapting women to male norms, instead of seeing difference as a positive resource. Solveig Bergman has pointed to the confluence of ‘cultural feminism’ (a current within Nordic feminism which promotes a women-centred culture) with the newly emerging mass movement for peace in Europe following the rising tensions between the superpowers around 1980. Within the major Finnish feminist organization Naisasialliitto Unioni (the Feminist Association Unioni), peace work was seen as the most important aspect of ‘women’s culture’ and the central aim of the feminist movement. According to Unioni, women could best contribute to both national and international security by working for peace.25

This feminist opposition to including women in existing military organizations received a great deal of public attention due to the dramaturgy of journalism. Whenever women and defence were made topical, journalists turned to the feminist and peace movements for ‘the opposite opinion’ in relation to the mainstream, nationalist-conservative view. In reality, Unioni represented a minority position within the broader Finnish women’s movement. The Central Association of Women’s Organizations (Naisjärjestöjen Keskusliitto), which gathered together the independent and centre-right women’s associations, rather
took the same position as the 1986 committee report: there was no contradiction between women working for peace and working in support of national defence. In 1984, the Central Association even sent an appeal to the defence minister calling for the proposals about educating women in crisis preparedness, as put forward by the 1970 committee, to be at long last realized.26

The relative strengths of these different views were exposed as parliament debated women’s inclusion in Finnish UN peacekeeping corps in 1984. A government bill proposing some adjustments to peacekeepers’ legal status included a change of wording from ‘men’ to ‘persons’, which would in theory allow women to enlist (although this option was not realized until 1991). The bill was welcomed by all political parties, except the far-left Finnish People’s Democratic League. It was taken for granted that women peacekeepers would not be armed or given any weapons training. Yet the Council of Equality between Men and Women, a parliamentary advisory body, caused an unexpected stir by rejecting the reform on the grounds that it constituted an attempt to incorporate women into the military apparatus. The Council declared that the exclusion of women from military service was not a gender equality issue, since it did not injure women’s human rights or their fundamental freedoms. Much of the parliamentary debate came to revolve around this objection, which most MPs found incomprehensible. Spokespersons of all non-communist parties declared that they understood participation in the peace corps as an obvious advancement of gender equality for women, even as they stressed that women would only be employed in tasks fitting them, such as nursing and clerical work. The contested paragraph was adopted by a vast majority, although four female Social Democratic MPs broke away from their party line and joined the communist opposition.27

The parliamentary vote displayed an overwhelming political support for women’s participation in security work associated with the armed forces, as long as women stayed in un-armed, auxiliary positions, which could be understood as non-military roles. As Anne-Maria Holli points out in her analysis of the 1984 debate, both proponents and opponents of the bill based their gender ideology upon similar notions of essential gender differences. Yet they valued the male norm, incarnated in the armed forces, differently. The majority held a gender ideology of complementarity whereas the opponents of the bill drew on the ideology of cultural feminism, which held up a separate female sphere of activity marked by women’s desire for peace as a model for both women and men.28

To sum up, the mainstream view on the place of women in the gendered division of defence work was, until the mid-1980s, mainly challenged by groups associated with feminism, socialism and the peace movement, who called for disarmament and women’s complete removal from the military defence system. In terms of conceptualizations of security, the leftist and feminist groups argued that women should promote societal security through peace activism. The conservative mainstream included women’s participation in the concept of ‘total defence’, yet usually talked about women’s defence work in terms of civic contributions within a security framework that was expressly broader than military defence.

A woman at the watershed: the complex agency of Minister Elisabeth Rehn

The end of the Cold War turned out to be a watershed in the history of women’s military participation in Finland. The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989–1991 changed not only Finland’s geopolitical situation, but also the
atmosphere in the country’s society. A wariness which had been associated with living in the shadow of the Soviet superpower gradually dissolved. Finland made a swift, albeit measured, security policy re-orientation westwards. As the apparent moral, economic and political bankruptcy of the communist system seemed to vindicate the generations who had waged war against the Soviet Union in 1939–1944, there was a marked change in the Finnish cultural memory of the war years. A public renaissance of pronouncedly nationalist attitudes and representations, defined by the historians Tiina Kinnunen and Markku Jokisipilä as a ‘neo-patriotic turn’, produced a surge of popular interest in the Winter War and the Continuation War, both waged against Russia, resulting in a great number of commemorative events as well as films and books idealizing and romanticizing the wars as embodiments of national character and civic virtue. The war veterans, now for the first time including the female veterans of the Lotta Svärd Association, became objects of nationalist celebration in an unprecedented fashion.²⁹

According to Mady Wechsler Segal, women tend to be least integrated into national defence in historical situations of ‘medium threat level’. The propensity to recruit women increases both during acute military crises, when all hands are needed, and in situations of low threat, as society takes a more relaxed attitude to questions of military organization.³⁰ Finland after the end of the Cold War might appear to be an example of a lowered threat level concurring with women’s military inclusion. Yet even if the perceived threat of a large-scale war diminished, Finnish security policy in the early 1990s stressed the continued importance of maintaining military preparedness. Finland heavily increased its arms purchases in 1990–1992.³¹ The neo-patriotic wave also brushed off on the conscript army, which saw its societal significance and standing being renewed and increased. It could be argued that Finnish women’s military integration was facilitated by the enhanced attractiveness of civic military participation, rather than by any dominant perception of military defence having become less crucial for national security.

Another contextual factor was the steady advance of women’s positions in the labour market. The mid-1980s saw some milestones in this regard: the opening up of the priesthood in the state Lutheran church and the first law on gender equality being finally adopted by parliament after years of wrangling – both in 1986. The armed forces and military conscription were exempted from the new ban on gender discrimination in the labour market.³² Yet the military increasingly stood out as the last professional and societal area formally excluding women, as well as the last of the armed forces in the Nordic countries to do so. A younger generation of women was increasingly questioning this special status of the military sphere as being somehow exempted from general principles of gender equality.³³ As stated by the Central Association of Women’s Organizations in 1992, it was evident that young women in Finnish society accepted the idea of women entering into military training and the military professions on a voluntary basis, whereas middle-aged and older women ‘adopted more of an attitude of reserve’.³⁴

Towards the end of the 1980s, the public debate on women’s military participation heightened. Official proposals were made for opening military positions of a civilian nature, such as military priests and military doctors, to women. In general, the old front lines stayed in place and feminist organizations voiced continued concerns over the ‘militarisation’ of women.³⁵ Yet in early 1990 a breaking up of the ice suddenly became noticeable. In February, the retiring Commander of the Armed Forces, General Jaakko
Valtanen, in a farewell interview, expressed a slight openness to the idea of admitting women into officer training. Valtanen had throughout the 1980s opposed giving women military training. Pointing to the Scandinavian countries, he now spoke of granting women opportunities to make a military career as a gender equality issue, but repeated his objections to conscripting women or giving them combat training. In March, his newly-appointed successor, Admiral Jan Klenberg, spoke with a new frankness about both gender equality and personnel shortages as reasons for admitting women into non-combat positions, albeit underlining that ‘certainly, no one wants to see armed women’. In May, the influential weekly Suomen Kuvailehti splashed a large feature on the malcontents among the 6000 women already working as civilian employees within the armed forces. A trade union representative claimed these women felt disregarded as women and civilians within the military organization, while also sharply criticizing the women’s and peace organizations for using ‘deprecatory language’ about women who had chosen to work within the armed forces. In June, finally, the question of women and defence virtually exploded into the national consciousness, as Finland got its first female minister of defence.

When Elisabeth Rehn was appointed minister of defence in June 1990, it was at first considered to be a publicity stunt by her small social-liberal Swedish People’s Party. The press certainly loved the visuals of the feminine and elegant lady minister, often in long skirts and sweetly smiling, inspecting troops and equipment, or talking to soldiers and officers in grey and hyper-masculine military environments. Yet Rehn turned out to be a sensationnally successful minister of defence, who brought a new kind of intrepid outspokenness to the Finnish military and security policy debate and came to enjoy exceptional popularity. She combined a staunch pro-defence stance with a reform-minded approach to stuffy military traditions, in the process boosting the public standing of both her office and the armed forces.

The reform process opening military training and officer education to Finnish women was afterwards closely associated with Elisabeth Rehn’s term as minister. Merely by being a woman, she became subject to a range of expectations with regard to women’s military participation. She pursued an active policy of promoting women’s involvement in national defence, opening up un-armed positions as UN-peacekeepers, military doctors, veterinarians and military priests to women. The peace movement and feminist organizations feared that she would promote military service for women. Young women approached her hoping that she would do so. Yet on taking office in 1990, Rehn repeatedly and vehemently opposed such a reform. In all essentials, she embraced the traditional pro-defence view on women’s participation, pointing out that there was a broad range of non-combat and non-military tasks for women within national defence. Finnish society was not ready for a women’s voluntary military service, Rehn stated in several speeches and interviews in 1990–1991. Neither would such a thing, she claimed, be compatible with her own ethical values.

What Elisabeth Rehn really wanted to promote, at the outset, was information and courses directed at women, raising their awareness of security policy and improving what she called women’s civic ‘crisis preparedness’. Similar to the committees on women and defence of the 1970s and 1980s, she wanted a closer integration of women into national security structures while keeping them excluded from using weapons or training for combat situations. This led her to argue as well for a broader concept of security and
defence, where actual military defence made up just a part of ‘total defence’. She pointed to the need for women’s participation in responding to nuclear accidents and oil spills, refugee crises, and world economic disruptions, as well as environmental disasters.\footnote{41}

It took Minister Rehn slightly more than a year to change her mind. In September 1991, she declared that she had been moved by the number of women who had written to her personally or contacted the office of the gender equality ombudsman, demanding the right to serve and make a military career for themselves. Presumably, a factor facilitating her turnaround was the Social Democratic Party leaving government after the election in early 1991, being replaced by the centre-right Centre Party in a coalition government with the conservative Coalition Party and some smaller non-socialist parties. Remaining in office as minister of defence, Rehn now found herself to be part of a decidedly more pro-defence political setup. Her increasing personal popularity also gave her more leeway for bold initiatives. Be that as it may, Rehn now announced that she would appoint a committee to investigate women’s military participation and welcomed an open and ‘unprejudiced’ public debate. Maintaining that she personally objected to the idea, Rehn freely admitted that there seemed to be no tenable reasons for preventing women who wanted to enter armed service from doing so. She also pointed to recent polls suggesting a change in public opinion on the matter.\footnote{42}

When it mattered, Minister Rehn put her political weight behind advancing a reform. In spite of initial resistance, both from within the government coalition and among officials at the state gender equality office, she forced the appointment of a committee and picked a known advocate of women’s voluntary military service to chair it; the legislative adviser at the Ministry of Justice, Kaarina Buure-Hägglund.\footnote{43} During 1992, Rehn also moved towards actively advocating a reform in her public speeches. She argued that women should have the right to decide for themselves and claimed that evidence from the Scandinavian countries demonstrated that adding female perspectives and skills would improve both the atmosphere and organizational efficiency of the armed forces.\footnote{44}

The agency of Elisabeth Rehn is interesting in its complexity. Her declared personal views on the matter were almost identical with the women of the 1970 and 1986 committees. She wanted to expand women’s participation and agency through a broadened conceptualization of security and crisis preparedness, yet preserve the crucial gender division concerning armed violence. Rehn nevertheless came to work as a catalyst for a shift of focus towards a militarization of women’s security work – by virtue of being a woman and by her unprejudiced openness to rethinking security doctrine and military culture.

**Collected disagreements: the women and military defence committee**

The Committee on Women and Military Defence (WMD), appointed by Minister Rehn in January 1992, was assembled from a selection of representatives of all the parliamentary parties, supplemented with officials from the ministries for defence and education. The reform model it proposed in 1993 was more or less implemented as such in 1995. Yet the workings of the committee were ridden with conflicts that mirrored the fundamental disagreements over women’s military participation in Finnish society. In September 1992, committee members opposing military service for women told journalists they felt steamrollered by the committee chair and accused the committee work of being biased.
towards a specific outcome from the outset. They pointed out that the committee’s secretariat, as well as the expert adviser staff, were dominated by employees of the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces.45

The preparatory work and experts’ reports from the ministry indeed indicate that strong forces within the ministry and the Defence Command (main headquarters) were by now in support of a reform. A ministry memorandum in late 1991 stated that the inclusion of women was ‘the logical consequence of societal developments towards increasing gender equality’ and would promote the development of the armed forces ‘towards better corresponding to the needs of a rapidly changing society’.46 The ministry had already, in October 1991, requested an assessment of the experiences of female personnel in the Swedish armed forces. The markedly positive reply received from the Swedish commander-in-chief in November 1991 was repeatedly quoted in subsequent Finnish policy papers. The Swedish military reported no significant problems, apart from some lingering negative attitudes among male personnel, and pointed to significant benefits. Women contributed to an improved workplace atmosphere which led to a higher quality of education and improved results. Women also practised leadership differently, providing valuable supplements to male leadership.47 This report provided the reformists in Finland with a crucial new argument. The issue was no longer, as in Scandinavia during the 1970s, a matter of women’s labour market rights versus military efficiency.48 The reform could now be argued to promote both rights and efficiency.

The gradual shift among Finnish security policymakers came clearly into view in May 1992, as a workgroup consisting mainly of leading Ministry of Defence officials presented their report on how to improve conditions for female employees within the defence sector. Even if this report continued the tradition of discussing women’s military work within the context of a broadening of security tasks, it expressed new understandings of gender diversity as a positive resource for the military organization. The workgroup pointed to several contemporary security trends that called for diversifying recruitment. The development of military technology diminished the significance of physical strength; modern warfare made taking care of civilian populations caught in the warzone a central task for the military forces; and the armed forces needed to counter new threats to national security, such as nuclear accidents, refugee disasters and economic crises. All this, the report argued, put pressure on the armed forces to optimize the use of all potential human resources. Primarily, this meant recruiting more women to military tasks associated with securing civilians and supporting the combat units. In light of international developments, as well as women’s increasing participation in the labour market, the report stated, opening all military positions to women should also be taken into consideration.49

The WMD Committee Chair Kaarina Buure-Hägglund notes in her memoirs that at this point, the Finnish military commanders had still not taken any principled stand on the question of women’s military participation. From a military point of view, she was told, there was no immediate need, as the supply of male conscripts was sufficient. Several high-ranking officers at the ministry and headquarters nonetheless helped her promote a sweeping reform. Buure-Hägglund found an important ally in the Chief of the Defence Command, General Gustav Hägglund (no relation). As commander of the UN peace-keeping missions to the Golan Heights and in Lebanon in 1985–1988, Hägglund had come into contact with female peacekeepers from several nations, especially Norway and
Canada. The presence of women, he remarked in a 1995 interview, only made for tidier habits and a healthier and more considerate atmosphere within the military units – a variation on the efficiency-through-diversity argument. In the fall of 1992, he helped the WMD chair to convince the Commander of the Armed Forces, Admiral Jan Klenberg, that giving women military status while excluding them from combat positions was impracticable due to the developments of modern warfare. It would also, they argued, effectively hinder meaningful military careers for women.\footnote{50}

The proposals put forward by the WMD Committee in April 1993 were supported by a majority of only nine committee members, while a minority of five attached a detailed dissenting opinion. The majority proposed the introduction of voluntary military service for women and the opening of all military positions on the same terms and conditions that applied to men. Finland should pass over any models where military positions were opened only partially or gradually. A complete integration of women was the international trend and the path chosen especially by the other Nordic countries, the report argued. The majority referred to societal and technological developments that had made earlier social and physical obstacles to women’s soldiering irrelevant. It stressed Scandinavian models and experiences, as well as recent opinion polls that displayed strong public support for a reform. In a key wording, the committee stated the importance of the military ‘being perceived as an integral part of society’. It was in the best interests of the armed forces that the development of women’s position in society was matched by corresponding developments within the forces.\footnote{51}

A thorny question was how voluntary military service for women could be advanced in the name of gender equality at the same time as mandatory service for men was preserved. The committee majority fended it off, stating that they had not been commissioned to suggest any fundamental changes in the democratically legitimated defence system. The idea of mandatory service for women was rejected as ‘unnecessary’ for both military and practical purposes. Its reform proposals – the majority claimed in a remarkable formulation – were ‘not based on arguments about gender equality’, but on ‘the general development of women’s position in society’, as well as the ‘positive effects which have proven to follow from cooperation between men and women in other sectors of society’. Here as well, references were made to positive experiences in the Scandinavian militaries. Women and men ‘complemented each other’ in terms of military leadership and educational style. For this reason, women should not be trained separately but fully integrated into the male training units and programmes. Only the barracks dormitories would be gender separated.\footnote{52}

The majority made none of the traditional references to broader concepts of security which had run through previous committee reports on women and defence. This supports the notion that these previous discourses had been geared to legitimate the exclusion of women from military tasks – as indeed was the case in the dissenting opinion of the WMD committee minority. A central claim of the minority was that the committee’s work had been limited to an overly narrow focus on military defence. Any in-depth discussions on more profound changes due to the altered geopolitical environment had been ruled out from the onset. Security in this new era, the minority claimed, had less to do with soldiers and weaponry and more with issues such as social equality, economic development, environmental issues, internationalization and multiculturalism.\footnote{53}
The five dissenting members were all women from different parties, ranging from the Left Alliance, Social Democratic, and Green parties, to the morally conservative Centre Party and the Christian League. All but one of them represented the parliamentary opposition. The general tone of their dissenting opinion was critical of, not to say hostile towards, the armed forces and military defence, echoing arguments of the new women's movement of the 1980s. Making military service voluntary for women and mandatory for men could not be justified with gender equality arguments, they stated. Women would have to adapt themselves to subordinated positions in an unreformed authoritarian culture created by men and for men. Moreover, the minority claimed, this reform, which only concerned a negligible group of female volunteers, drew attention and resources away from the real and pressing concerns of the vast majority of women: the ongoing dismantling of the Finnish welfare state in the wake of the economic depression which had recently hit Finland.\textsuperscript{54}

Both the committee majority and minority had difficulties relating their positions to gender equality arguments. Neither wanted military service or conscription for men and women on equal terms. The majority solved this by arguing that opening military training and military professions at least to those women who were eager to participate or make a military career was a step forward for both women's rights and military efficiency. The minority argued that the existing military system represented an essentially masculinist culture that could not be reformed, only replaced by a fundamentally different yet vaguely outlined non-military security regime. The minority position suggested a radical break with traditional Finnish security policy, but stayed in line with a long tradition within the peace, women’s and labour movements that combined anti-militarism with an essentialist notion of women as naturally less disposed towards military violence than men. The majority position, although aligning closely with conservative Finnish security doctrine, based on strong armed forces and continuous patriotic mobilization of the citizenry, constituted much more of a rupture with traditional notions of the gendered division of defence and military work.

\textbf{A contest of paradoxes: interest groups and parliament debating gender equality}

The reactions to the WMD Committee proposals among different interest groups and political parties show that women's voluntary military service by 1993 already enjoyed wide societal support, although the issue remained controversial. The scales had recently tipped over: according to opinion polls referred to in the committee report, 49% of the Finnish population accepted women's voluntary military training in 1986. In late 1990, support was still at only 51%, but two years later, in late 1992, that figure had risen to 62%.\textsuperscript{55}

At a hearing in the autumn of 1992 and in the comments on the WMD Committee report received in the summer of 1993, the reform proposals were supported by the right-wing parties, most of the state ministries, and the Defence Command, as well as most labour market organizations, including the trade unions representing military and armed forces personnel. The Central Association of Women’s Organizations and the organizations associated with women’s voluntary defence work also signalled their undivided support. There was not a single suggestion made that women should be restricted to non-
combat positions, or that the reform should be implemented only gradually. The crucial opinion delivered by the Defence Command was remarkably brief, stating that the armed forces thought it was important to broaden women’s opportunities for participation in national defence; ‘There are no rational reasons to indicate that women’s participation in military service should be constrained’. The Defence Command nonetheless insisted that the defence system should continue to be based on the existing universal male conscription.

Critical opinions, much along the lines of the committee minority, were delivered by the left-wing parties and their women’s organization, the peace organizations and some of the feminist organizations. Most of these highlighted the gender inequality of having different rights and obligations for men and women and argued that security policy and crisis preparedness would better be taught to both girls and boys within the public school system. The Ministry of Labour and the Federation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK) were alone among the ministries and labour markets organizations to oppose the reform proposal. Both were by tradition heavily dominated by the Social Democratic Party.

Among the political parties, the Centre Party was apparently most torn over the issue. This former peasants’ party with a largely rural electorate represented conservative values in family policy issues. The notion of women serving in combat troops was hard to digest for many of its members. According to Rehn and Buure-Hägglund, the appointment of a parliamentary committee at the highest political level to investigate the matter was prevented in government by the Minister for Social Affairs Eeva Kuuskoski, the Centre Party’s most prominent female politician. The Centre Party leadership announced its support of the WMD Committee report in the summer of 1993, yet its women’s organization delivered an opinion steeped in scepticism and wielding many of the same critical arguments as the left-wing parties and peace organizations.

Minister Rehn declared that she had been convinced by the positive feedback and her ministry started preparing a government bill based on the WMD Committee’s proposals. Yet when the coalition government approved of this bill in August 1994, five ministers from the Centre Party signed a dissenting opinion, drafted by Minister Anneli Jäätteenmäki (who would later become the first female chair of her party and Finland’s first female prime minister), stating that women’s opportunities to participate in national defence should instead be improved by developing the voluntary defence work performed in civic organizations. Three other Centre Party ministers, including the Prime Minister Esko Aho, nonetheless supported the bill.

In terms of party politics, the government bill on women’s voluntary military service of August 1994 stands out as a gender equality reform ‘from the right’. Essentially reproducing the majority arguments from the WMD Committee report, the bill conformed closely with a traditionally right-wing, positive assessment of the armed forces and existing conscription system. This was combined with a strong emphasis on individual women’s freedom of choice. As pointed out by Anne-Maria Holli, this bill was based on a liberalistic view of gender equality, focusing on removing an occupational ban that restricted women’s voluntary activities. In the parliamentary debate, the bill was most energetically defended by MPs from the centre-right, value-liberal and staunchly pro-defence National Coalition Party. They hailed the reform as an advancement of women’s
rights at the same time as they forcefully defended the legitimacy and traditions of the existing military system against the anti-militarist jabs from the socialist and Green opposition parties.64

The parliamentary opposition, on the other hand, forcefully argued that the bill would neither advance gender equality nor improve national security. A reform in the name of gender equality, it was said, would require conscription to be made either voluntary or mandatory for both men and women.65 Representatives for the government coalition gave conflicting answers to this challenge. The chairman of the Defence Committee, Kalevi Lamminen of the National Coalition Party, said the bill represented a significant step towards greater gender equality, yet it was ‘not directly’ motivated from a gender equality perspective. Motherhood, pregnancy and childcare, he stated, were important reasons for why mandatory military service for women ‘naturally could not come into question’.66 This emphasis on motherhood was contradicted by MP Kirsi Piha, of his own party, who stated that talking of women’s and men’s different roles was ‘outdated and backward … in modern society we can view men and women as individuals and not as women and men, particularly when working life is concerned’.67 Minister Rehn for her part claimed that the reform was ‘in no way an issue of gender equality’, but rather a question of ‘fairness’ and ‘a woman’s right to participate in the defence of her country in the same way as men and on the terms she chooses’. She also said it was an issue of ‘tolerance and liberalism’, stating that her own generation, whatever their personal feelings, had no right to forbid and stop young women from entering the military for the benefit of society if that was what they wanted.68

The opponents of the bill diverged even more from each other in their notions of gender equality and womanhood. Some MPs emphasized ‘natural’ gender differences and spoke of the ‘deepest essence’ and the ‘biological role' of women being associated with motherhood and the preservation of life.69 Others wanted to hold on to the traditional solution of involving women in unarmed defence work.70 Yet others called for a reform based on a more consistent understanding of gender equality. The Green Party tabled an alternative bill, proposing the abolishment of male conscription and its replacement with a gender-neutral civil service for all young people. Within this new civil service, each young person would be able to choose between serving in environmental protection, health and social care, development aid work, civilian crisis management, or the armed forces.71

Similar to previous debates, resistance to women’s military service went hand in hand with a critical attitude to military security solutions and an emphasis on associating women with alternative security concepts. MPs of the left-wing and Green parties scorned military culture as hierarchical, authoritarian and behind the times. They blamed the bill for leaving these structures untouched, which would prevent women from ever achieving real equality within the organization.72 They pointed to social equality and welfare services as more important for both societal and international security than an expanding military training. Green MP Tuija Pykäläinen said that the bill reinforced the military emphasis in Finnish security policy, ‘at a time when we should build joint responsibility and operations models for threats more real than military conflict, such as environmental catastrophes, the steepening of welfare inequality, religious fanaticism or xenophobia’.73
The reform bill was eventually passed by a majority of 103–66, mainly with the votes of the government coalition. Two of the major parties, the Centre Party and the Social Democrats, were split over the issue in the final vote, with a handful of MPs in each party voting against the party line. In the final analysis, the parliamentary majority which adopted the reform can be characterized as moderately conservative in its outlook on both gender equality and security policy. The arguments used in support of the reform were imbued with a positive appreciation of the armed forces and a strong military defence. The fundamental inequality of mandatory conscription for men only was left untouched and only supplemented with a ‘security valve’, as it were, admitting voluntary women in order to release societal pressure.

**Summary and conclusions**

This study has pointed to a number of reasons for the why the process that led to the introduction of voluntary military service for women in 1995 followed another chronology than comparable processes in the other Nordic countries. Three major factors that propelled the opening of the military professions to women in the Scandinavian countries were largely absent in Finland throughout the 1970s and 1980s. There was no lack of male manpower, no accumulation of women performing military tasks in voluntary or other hybrid capacities, and no strong women’s organizations pushing for a reform. Some Finnish peculiarities that were absent in the other Nordic countries can be added: the politically and sexually stigmatized public memory of the wartime Lotta organization, the wariness that characterized Finland’s relationship with the Soviet Union, as well as the strong attachment of Finnish feminist and socialist women’s organizations to the peace movement.

In the geopolitical thaw that set in around 1990, elusive cultural and political forces seem to have been decisive. A militarization of general notions of female citizenship followed in the wake of post-Cold War neo-patriotism and a progressive normalization of formal gender equality throughout the labour market. The positive Scandinavian experiences of integrating female volunteers into the armed forces were undoubtedly decisive as well. In view of the Scandinavian examples, it was increasingly difficult to dismiss women’s voluntary military service in Finland as outlandish or impracticable. Yet considering the continued strong resistance to women’s military integration among female leftist politicians, trade unionists and feminists, the appointment of a female, politically liberal defence minister in 1990, as well as the accession of a centre-right coalition government in 1991, was obviously significant for both the timing and swiftness of the Finnish reform process.

Concerning the conceptualizations and understandings of gender and security that underpinned the debate, a striking feature is the strong historical continuity up until the 1980s. The mainstream view was essentially the same as it had been ever since the interwar period and the Second World War. Men and women were seen as united in purpose and cooperating within a gendered division of defence work, where women contributed in a range of tasks seen as analogous to their ‘natural’ activities in civilian society. The only changes in this mainstream understanding during the 1970s and 1980s was a continuous broadening of the conceptualizations of security brought up in discussions on women’s ‘crisis preparedness’ to include, for example, environmental and nuclear
accidents. These changes certainly reflected an actual diversification of understandings of societal security, as well as an ambition to broaden and give prominence to women’s participation in national security. They nonetheless had the discursive effect of renewing the legitimation of women’s exclusion from military service.

The WMD Committee report in 1993 catered for the conservative mainstream in its efforts to emphasize continuity while promoting a radical reform, arguing that women’s presence would only improve the efficiency of traditional military structures and that women’s military participation was the logical completion of a long historical development of women’s position in society. The new view of women as capable of and entitled to military service under the same conditions of men was indeed superimposed on traditional understandings, since the vast majority of Finnish women were expected to stay within traditional auxiliary and support tasks in a potential armed conflict. Male conscription was left untouched and the military sphere remained exempted from general principles of gender equality. But for those women who voluntarily chose to participate in military defence – supposedly a small minority – an opportunity previously denied all women was now opened up. Significantly, this opportunity was no longer exclusively discussed in terms of women’s rights to employment and career opportunities, as it had been in 1970s Scandinavia. In the Finnish reform process of the early 1990s, military service also appeared as a form of civic participation for women as citizens who would then return to civilian life as reservists. This arguably contributed to jolting the public image of women’s participation in national security work – perhaps disproportionately so – towards military security.

Notes

3. Orsten, “Forsvarssak eller kvinnesak?”; Sundevall, Sista manliga yrkesmonopolet; Slök-Andersen, Kvinnernes trinwise adgang.
5. See e.g. Wikander, Kvinnors och mäns arbeten; Östman, Mjölk och jord.
11. Due to restrictions posed by the Covid19-epidemic, I predominantly searched four digitized titles on the National Library website at http://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi. The daily Helsingin Sanomat and the weekly Suomen Kuvalehti were the nationally most prominent publications in their respective genre in the period, whereas Etelä-Suomen Sanomat and Länsi-Savo were major regional newspapers.
32. Law on gender equality between men and women 1986/609.
33. See e.g. “Naisten on jo aika päästä asepalvelukseen,” Helsingin Sanomat 19.11.1987.
43. Buure-Hägglund, Nainen kenraalikunnassa, 17.
48. See also Carreas, Gender and the Military, 197–198.
49. Puolustusministerion naistyöryhmä, Raportti Puolustusvoimien palveluksessa olevien naisten aseman kehittämisestä, 73–76. Committee protocol 6.5.1992, ACWMD/MoD.
51. Naisten vapaaehtoinen asepalvelus, 37–44.
53. Naisten vapaaehtoinen asepalvelus, dissenting opinion.
54. Naisten vapaaehtoinen asepalvelus, dissenting opinion.
56. Committee hearing protocol 26.10.1992; Summary of comments on the committee report, Ministry of Defence 7.9.1993, ACWMD/MoD.
57. “Pääesikunta kannattaa naisten vapaaehtoista asepalvelusta.” Press release by the Defence Command of the Armed Forces, nr 124, 29 June 1993, ACWMD/MoD.
58. Committee hearing protocol 26.10.1992; Summary of comments on the committee report, Ministry of Defence 7.9.1993, ACWMD/MoD.
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Notes on contributor

Anders Ahlbäck is associate senior lecturer of history at Stockholm University, Sweden, and docent in Nordic history at Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland. He has published widely on the gender history of military conscription and men’s gendered experiences in the military sphere in Finland, circa 1890–1940. He is currently researching notions of male honour and male citizenship in early Scandinavian debates on universal male conscription, ca 1800–1880.

ORCID

Anders Ahlbäck http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4728-2765

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