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To cite this article: Anders Ahlbäck, Fia Sundevall & Johanna Hjertquist (2024) A Nordic model of gender and military work? Labour demand, gender equality and women's integration in the armed forces of Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, Scandinavian Economic History Review, 72:1, 49-66, DOI: [10.1080/03585522.2022.2142661](https://doi.org/10.1080/03585522.2022.2142661)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03585522.2022.2142661>



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A Nordic model of gender and military work? Labour demand, gender equality and women's integration in the armed forces of Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the political process towards full formal integration of women in the military professions in Scandinavia and Finland, investigating the shifting roles played by military labour demands and politics of gender equality. It provides the first comparative overview of these developments in the Nordic region. The analysis demonstrates the importance of historical continuity in women's military participation. Due to military labour demands, women were throughout the post-war decades recruited into a range of auxiliary, voluntary and hybrid capacities in the Scandinavian armed forces. The reforms opening the military professions to women in Denmark, Norway and Sweden in the 1970s were the outcome of a double crisis, as military needs for the regulation of these women's organisational status coincided with new political demands for gender equality in the labour market. Corresponding reforms in Finland were delayed by the country's lack of continuity in women's military participation as well as its sufficient supply of male military personnel. A common Nordic model of gender and military work nonetheless emerged in the 1990s, marked by equal rights to military participation for women on a voluntary basis, combined with mandatory military conscription for men.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 June 2022
Accepted 26 October 2022

KEYWORDS

Military work; Conscription; Gender Equality; Labour Demands; Working Life

1. Introduction

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Norway and Sweden) were amongst the first nations in the world to formally open all military training programmes, ranks, and professions for women. Neighbouring Finland followed suit in the mid-1990s. These reforms occurred during a time when the Nordic countries were positioning themselves as international forerunners in gender equality in and beyond the workplace. At a glance, it may appear that politics of gender equality also guided the relatively early integration of women in military work in these countries. The early inclusion of women would thus have been a natural or inevitable consequence of gender equality ideals permeating the Nordic countries and their labour market policies. However, and as we will demonstrate in this paper, promotion of gender equality was not always the main objective. Often, the reforms opening military positions to women came about as pragmatic solutions to specific problems and transitory situations.

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This article traces the political process towards full formal integration of women in the armed forces of each Nordic country with a standing army (Iceland thus excluded), investigating the shifting roles that military labour demands and politics of gender equality played in these developments. Thereby, the study aims to contribute to the field of research on gender in military working life and to our understanding of the shifting constellations of gender and work in the Nordic countries in the late 1900s. Our main question concerns the historical dynamics between different actors' motives and arguments for promoting or resisting opening military positions to women. What was the relative importance of military recruitment needs on the one hand and ideologies of gender equality on the other hand?

In the Nordic countries, women's labour market participation and political participation has increased rapidly since the 1960s, and still earn the Nordic countries top rankings in international indexes measuring gender equality (see e.g. Teigen & Skjeie, 2017; UNDP, 2022). The high degree of women's labour market- and political participation, both historically and today, unite the Nordic countries and make them stand out in an international perspective. However, it should be noted that while gender equality was on the political agenda of the Nordic countries in the late 1900s, the legislation and political mobilisation around the issue varied from country to country. Political scientists Borchorst, Christensen, and Raaum (1999) argue that rather than one homogenous Nordic model for gender equality, there were distinct national profiles, with significant differences, for example in the institutionalization of gender equality. In the same vein, we seek to problematise and historicise the notion of a 'Nordic model' as to when, why and how women gained access to the military labour market. As the following comparison between Nordic countries will show, the integration of women in the military was conditioned by different national contexts in terms of economic development, labour markets, military systems as well as gender equality policies.

In spite of different geopolitical situations, military traditions and alliances, all four Nordic countries studied here had similar military systems throughout the twentieth century. The regular national defence forces and its reserves were almost completely based on conscripted soldiers filling the ranks, with enlisted professional personnel serving only as training officers and technical specialists, as well as in positions of higher command. In the Cold War heyday of conscription, from the 1950s to the 1980s, the whole age class of young men around the age of 18–20 was – in principle – drafted for basic military training in each country. In practice, around 15–30 percent were always either exempted for health reasons or chose the alternative of doing non-military national service (Børresen, 2004; Ericson Wolke, 1999; Laitinen & Nokkala, 2005). Under such a recruitment regime, military work acquires a double nature of being a civic duty for most men, while also a professional career for some. How these two different conceptualizations of military work were variously gendered, in different times and places, constituted an important part of the dynamics between various motives for women's military integration.

What should be considered military work, military tasks or military positions, as opposed to civilian work, tasks or positions, has varied over time and between nations (see Sundevall, 2011; Yuval-Davis, 1981). In this study, we use the term 'military work' in a broad sense, referring not only to soldiering or being employed as an officer, but all work performed within the armed forces. Among those performing such military work, there have historically been great differences in organisational status and terms of employment. During much of the period we study, Nordic women performed military work either as volunteers, within various associations for women's so-called 'defence work', as civilian employees of the armed forces, or as enlisted military personnel recruited on a voluntary basis but with contractual obligations in case of war. As civilian employees or even as military personnel, women were for a long time excluded from full military status and were not considered part of the normal military hierarchy; they could not do military service, not become officers, and were not allowed in combat tasks. When we refer to 'women's military participation' or 'women's military integration', we have in view women's entry into the hierarchy of soldiers and officers, traditionally considered the essence of the armed forces, on more or less the same terms and conditions as their male counterparts.

Although the armed forces were and still are one of the main state employers, previous contemporary history research has paid little attention to the military as a workplace and labour market. As a consequence, one of the most gender segregated and hierarchical areas of late twentieth century working life has been largely overlooked in the study of gender and work. As numerous scholars have emphasised (e.g. Goldstein, 2006; Hagemann & Schüller-Springorum, 2002; Sasson-Levy, 2011) military work and organisations have throughout the twentieth century been both gendered and gendering, in the sense that core tasks related to combat and leadership have been associated with masculinity and reserved exclusively for men. Furthermore, male-only compulsory military training confirmed and reconstituted soldiering as a male-coded area of work. Since conscript training served as a qualification for professional military positions, it granted men access to major parts of military working life, from which women were simultaneously excluded. Still, the military has frequently been disregarded in historical research on discriminatory working-life policies or considered a self-explanatory exception (Sundevall, 2011). Neither have gender equality indices accounted for male-only military conscription (Heikkilä & Laukkanen, 2020).

Theoretical contributions on women's integration into the armed forces have largely focused on military labour demand as the main driving force. This is also true for the contribution from sociologist Mady Wechsler Segal (1995), who has provided one of the few attempts made at building a systematic theory on the conditions under which women's military roles have expanded across time and place. Segal pointed to a number of interrelated factors furthering women's military integration, such as shortages of male military personnel due to fast economic growth; a relatively high level of female participation and low level of gender segregation in the broader labour market; increasingly egalitarian social values concerning gender; either low levels of threat to national security or alternately really large-scale military conflict; developments of military technology increasing the use of air power; a shift of military objectives towards peacekeeping and domestic policing functions; as well as military recruitment moving from conscription towards all-volunteer forces. The main driving force identified by Segal was, however, military labour demand (cf. Iskra, Trainor, Leithauser, & Segal, 2002).

As we will show, recruitment needs were indeed a recurrent factor behind women's military integration in Denmark, Norway and Sweden up until the 1970s, when there was a change of discourse and the matter became largely reframed as a gender equality issue. In the middle of historical developments, labour market demands and gender equality policies of course were not isolated from each other, but on the contrary heavily interdependent. For the purpose of analytical clarity, we nevertheless discuss them as discreet historical factors in the empirical parts of our paper, in order to discuss their connections in the final analysis.

Women's military inclusion as an accumulative process is another issue central to our investigation. Military historian Virgilio Ilari (1995) has emphasised the positive correlation between women's general presence in military organisations and the expansion of their tasks. Seeking to explain Italian women's relatively late access to soldiering and officer positions, he points to the low number of women working in the Italian military as civilian employees or auxiliary personnel during preceding decades, as compared to most other western countries. Sociologist Helena Carreiras (2006), for her part, has questioned the generalizability of this type of case studies, pointing to major national differences in the correlation between women's military presence during WWI and the expansion of their military tasks during the Cold War some 50 years later. Carreiras does not, however, take into account to what extent women's presence was continuous over time, something which Sundevall (2011) argues might be of significance.

This study brings together the small number of previous scholarly works on gender and military work in the Nordic countries in the second half of the twentieth century and combines them with additional studies of primary source material, such as government and parliamentary publications as well as unprinted archival documents. Other than our own previous research (Ahlbäck, 2022; Persson & Sundevall, 2019; Sundevall, 2011), we have in particular drawn on the insightful study and inspiring analysis of women's military integration in Norway by Lene Orsten (1999), as well as Beate Sløk-Andersen's clear-sighted survey of Danish developments (Sløk-Andersen, 2014).

Our analysis is presented in four sections. The first section summarises developments in all four countries from World War II until the 1960s. The second section provides a more detailed account of the crucial reform period from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s in the three Scandinavian countries, whereas the somewhat exceptional case of Finland is discussed separately in the third section. The fourth section brings together the driving forces and understandings of gender equality identified, for a comparative discussion and analytical synthesis.

2. Labour demand-driven integration: Second World War until 1960s

When the first reform initiatives on women's military integration were launched in Denmark, Sweden and Norway in the 1960s and early 1970s, a recurring argument was that women were already present in a broad range of tasks within the armed forces, albeit often with voluntary, non-salaried and non-military status. In this section, we discuss the early emergence of this female presence and the significance of its continuity or discontinuity for women's military integration. We make an overview of women's involvement in the Nordic armed forces from the Second World War up until the eve of the reform era in the 1970s, highlighting general patterns as well as some national peculiarities.

During the Second World War, women had been recruited as a labour reserve all over Europe and North America, in order to – as it was perceived – release men for military and combat duties (Carreiras, 2006). In Finland, Sweden and Norway, organisational frameworks for such recruitment were in place since the interwar period, in the so called *Lotta* or *Lotte* corps for women's voluntary defence work.

In war-struck Finland, the *Lotta Svärd* organisation mobilised some 200.000 women to assist the armed forces with medical services, alimentation and equipment, office work and air surveillance. Some 13.000 Finnish *Lottas* worked in non-combat tasks just behind the frontlines, and another 50.000 full-time at the home front. After the armistice with the Soviet Union in the fall of 1944, the Finnish *Lotta Svärd* associations were, however, abolished and outlawed by the Allied powers. In post-war Finland, the memory of their contribution to the war effort was politically stigmatised and sexualised by leftist and radical groups who associated the *Lottas* with militarism, ultra-nationalism and anticommunism (Kinnunen, 2006; Olsson, 2005). In the Cold War atmosphere of political cautiousness towards the Soviet Union, this effectively put a break on Finnish women's engagement in voluntary work for and in the military for decades to come.

Sweden, on the contrary, displays the greatest continuity in women's military work among the Nordic countries. Much along the same lines as in Finland, women were trained and deployed in a range of auxiliary services, including transportation and air surveillance, to help guard the Swedish neutrality during the war years. Due to the strong geopolitical tensions of the Cold War, Sweden continued a military policy of high alert and rearmament throughout the post-war period. The demand for military personnel remained high, at the same time as the male cohorts were shrinking as a consequence of sinking birth-rates. Positive experiences of women's deployment during the war years, as well as the relative cheapness of female military personnel, induced politicians and military leaders to propagate an increased use of female volunteers. A system for contracting and training Swedish *Lottas* for wartime deployment was developed. These women were seldom employed or salaried in the peacetime armed forces, yet made out a significant part of the reserve. In addition, the number of female civilian employees, mainly administrative personnel, doubled from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s (Sundevall, 2011).

Denmark and Norway were occupied by Germany during the Second World War, which prevented a large-scale recruitment of women similar to that in Finland and Sweden. In occupied Denmark, some 10.000 uniformed Danish women nonetheless did social service work within the *Lotte* corps and were trained for medical services, communications, alimentation and administration work (Jensen & Frøling, 2006; Schledermann, 1953). In Norway, the occupation led to the abolishment of women's voluntary defence organisations, but the Norwegian exile government in London

introduced conscription for Norwegian women who resided in Great Britain. Around 500 women were thus conscripted to take over auxiliary tasks, such as clerical work, technical maintenance and transportation, from male military personnel which was transferred to combat duty (Orsten, 1999).

The continued deployment of women as military personnel after the war, which was desired by the armed forces, ran into greater political and societal resistance in Norway than in Sweden. The Norwegian wartime women's corps were disbanded in June 1945, but the Ministry of Defence as well as the armed forces wished to continue recruiting female military personnel on a voluntary basis. The main motive was lack of male personnel, in view of declining male cohorts in the years to come. In 1946, a committee consisting of representatives of women's defence organisations as well as military authorities proposed that mandatory conscription for women both in peace- and wartime should be introduced. The purpose would be to train Norwegian women for auxiliary tasks in an armed conflict, primarily within medical services, communications and alimentation. As it transpired, continued military training for women was strongly resisted both in the Norwegian parliament and the press. The main reason was apparently the continued cultural significance of a gendered division of labour based on ideals of a male breadwinner and a female housewife (Gjeseth, 2016; Orsten, 1999; Schau, 1983; Værnø & Sveri, 1990).

Norwegian women nonetheless continued to do military work through the 1950s and 1960s, both as civilian employees in the armed forces and on a voluntary basis. A board of female inspectors was instituted in 1953 and with time became an important driving force for developing a women's service within the armed forces. A system for contracting female employees and volunteers who committed themselves to wartime, non-combat military service was developed, but this so-called Women's Preparedness Service created confusion over the peacetime status of the contracted women and turned out to attract few applicants (Orsten, 1999).

In the post-war period, Danish women organised within the *Lotte* associations also took up voluntary and auxiliary tasks associated with housewife skills in the armed forces and Home Guards. Simultaneously, however, voluntary women within the Women's Marine Corps as well as the Home Guard women's corps performed advanced technical duties in the Navy and Air Force, such as maritime surveillance and air traffic control (Rovsing, Jensen & Frøling, 2006; Sløk-Andersen, 2014).

The Danish politicians turned out to be more open to granting women a formal position within the armed forces than their colleagues in Norway. The fact that women already were present throughout the Danish armed forces was a main argument as Minister of Defence Poul Hansen already in 1962 advocated for women's access to military employment. The government subsequently decided that women could be employed in military positions. Besides the already existing option of civilian positions, such as secretarial work, women could now be employed to do military work that women had previously carried out as members of the voluntary corps, such as communications and intelligence. Women would nonetheless still be organised through separate women's corps and would – remarkably enough – not be paid for their services to the armed forces. The whole arrangement was exclusively motivated in terms of military recruitment needs and not women's rights or gender equality (Sløk-Andersen, 2014).

The continuity of women's military work in the Scandinavian countries should, according to Sundevall (2011), be taken into consideration when asking why these countries were amongst the first in the world to integrate women in all soldiering positions including combat – unlike neighbouring Finland, where women's defence work was discontinued for decades after the end of the WWII. The main reason behind this continuous recruitment of Scandinavian women during the post-war decades was the perceived or anticipated shortage of male military personnel. The military leadership was often urging on the deployment of women, albeit always taking for granted that combat tasks were beyond the so-called natural sphere of women's activities. An important background factor was also the positive experiences from wartime deployment of female auxiliary personnel (mainly in Sweden and Norway).

The paramount structural driver was, arguably, the general labour shortage in the Scandinavian countries, due to the strong post-war economic boom as well as demographic trends. Sweden, Denmark and Norway all became countries of net immigration by the 1960s, receiving relatively large numbers of foreign workers, although immigration to Sweden was by far the greatest and started earlier than to Denmark and Norway (Hilson, 2008). The factor of labour supply can also in part explain why Finland diverged. During the post-war reconstruction period, the country struggled economically in comparison to its Scandinavian neighbours and therefore had no labour shortage. There was no immediate need to supplement the male conscript army with female personnel. Finland even remained a country of net emigration up until the 1970s (Hilson, 2008).

3. Gender equality-driven integration: 1970s and 1980s

The 1970s turned out to be a pivotal period in terms of women's military participation in the Scandinavian countries. The gradually increased presence of women in the armed forces, in various forms of attachment, always unarmed and often unpaid or with non-military status, had with time created a number of ambiguities and practical problems. These needed solving in light of the continued need to recruit female military staff. In the early to mid-1970s these internal military processes were increasingly confronted with broad changes in the labour market, as women increasingly entered paid work and traditionally male sectors of employment. The era of housewives performing voluntary military work in their leisure time was coming to a close, even as a cultural imagination. Concurrently, commitments to gender equality were rapidly evolving in the political arena.

Moreover, it could be argued that the geopolitical context constituted a favourable backdrop for integrating women into the Nordic armed forces at this point in time. Segal (1995) points out that a low level of threat to national security is one of the conditions furthering women's access and integration into the armed forces. Admittedly, the easing of Cold War tensions coincided with the focus on women's rights within the Nordic armed forces in the 1970s. These combined currents led to an incremental shift in the forces propelling women's military integration, from internal recruitment needs towards external ideological and political forces. Nonetheless, women's *work* remained in focus, since the emerging gender equality legislation in the Nordic countries in this period was highly focused on women's labour market participation (Borchorst, 1999).

3.1. The 1970s: bringing gender equality into the armed forces

Reform processes in Denmark, Sweden and Norway started simultaneously around 1970, all originating in difficulties to recruit enough male personnel to the armed forces. Especially in Danish research, these strains on recruiting an all-male army have been linked to a loss of societal status for the military professions during that period (Rasmussen, 1987; Haslund-Christensen, 1988; Poulsen, 2013). In the age of youth and protest movements and a leftist *Zeitgeist*, this phenomenon was hardly limited to Denmark.

Recruitment challenges remained the main motivation for a bill that was passed by the Danish parliament as early as 1971, for the first time opening low-ranking military positions to women as salaried military employees. It should however be noted that this decision to enable the paid military employment of women in Denmark was also driven by confusion within the armed forces around women's position as not-really-civilian and not-really-military. This ambiguity had resulted in uncertainties about their responsibilities and roles in case of war (*Report on Female Personnel* 1968).

Women were to be introduced into the Danish armed forces through newly established, women-only basic training programmes, while men continued to receive their basic military education through conscript training. Yet once military positions were opened up to women in 1971, the process of change picked up speed. The women who entered the armed forces soon started making

inquiries about their possibilities for advancement, both vertically through the ranks and horizontally into specialisations that had not yet been opened to women. While not immediately granted, these requests resulted in the armed forces opening up its military academies – and thus, the rank of officer – to women in 1974. This was actually one of the few changes during the period that was effectuated through an internal decision of the armed forces, and not by parliament (Sløk-Anderesen, 2014; Schlüter, 1986).

The Norwegian government also appointed a committee in 1970 to reassess the existing women's service within Norway's armed forces. It was instructed to investigate women as a resource of military labour for situations of national emergency and assess whether personnel in the women's service should be given military status. A range of practical and legal issues needed solving, such as whether female personnel would be duty-bound by general mobilisation orders. This committee had members from the military, the parliament as well as the Norwegian *Lotte* organisation. In its 1973 report, it recommended opening up all non-combat military positions in the armed forces to women. It also proposed re-introducing selective conscription of women to basic training for wartime support tasks, in case a sufficient number of women would not volunteer. The motivations given for these radical measures all referred to military considerations, concerning staffing shortages as well as securing the large-scale mobilisation of well-trained female manpower in a military crisis. The committee stated it was essential to make women feel wanted within national defence (NOU, 1973, 37; Værnø & Sveri, 1990; Orsten, 1999).

In Sweden, the exclusion of women from specialised military educations and careers accessible only through the male-only military conscription system gained public exposure in the early 1960s, through extensive media coverage of a young woman's refusal to accept that she had been denied access to the air force's air engineering programme due to her gender (Persson & Sundevall, 2022). A few years later, the youth league of the Liberal party started pushing for gender equal rights and obligations in the military, in other words gender-neutral regulations for conscription, military training and military employment. These demands caused heated debates and prompted a detailed rejection by the armed forces that cited financial, organisational and biological reasons (FPU, 1965; SAF Joint Staff, 1965).

Due to current and expected shortfalls of military personnel, the commander of the Swedish air force nonetheless mandated an enquiry in 1966 into the possibilities to employ women as officers. The air force had broad and positive experiences of female staff – namely *Lottas* – who had held various semi-military positions since the Second World War, including some armed positions. The resulting enquiry concluded that the major hindrance for employing women was that they did not have access to the required conscript training. The Commander of the air force brought the matter to the attention of the government, which in turn mandated an investigation into the possibilities to introduce peacetime conscription of women (Commander of the Air Force, 1968; Sundevall, 2011). This turned out to be a dead end, which only delayed women's military integration in Sweden. Four years later, the only conclusion reached was that women should not be conscripted and thus had to be given access to the necessary training in some other manner. By then, the military staffing situation had already improved and no longer served as a driving force for the inclusion of women (Ds Fö, 1973).

In all of the Scandinavian countries, a new kind of political pressure on women's military integration was building in those early years of the 1970s. The period saw the rise to political prominence of women's rights and gender equality in the labour market. A majority in the Norwegian parliament thus welcomed the 1973 committee proposal because it was perceived as bringing gender equality into the armed forces (Værnø & Sveri, 1990). Following its recommendations, the Norwegian parliament passed a resolution in 1976 making it possible for women to attain military status and become military officers. Previous reforms along the same lines in Denmark were repeatedly held up as a positive model in the parliamentary debate. Norwegian officer education was consequently opened to women in 1977. The special women's service was abolished, with the aim of integrating women more fully into the armed forces. However, conscription-based military service

and combat positions remained unavailable for women, just like in the early Danish reforms (Storting/Norwegian parliamentary debates 1975–1976: 3133, 3136, 3142, 3149) (Table 1).

Sweden was by the mid-1970s increasingly promoting itself as a pioneering nation in matters of women's rights, in particular within the labour market (see e.g. Florin & Nilsson, 1999). Drawing on this high national profile in matters of gender equality, as well as the framework of the 1975 International Women's Year, the Swedish *Lotta* organisation joined forces with the liberal feminist Fredrika Bremer civil association. Together, they put pressure on the Social Democratic government to take action concerning women's right to military work (see e.g. *Lottanytt*, 1975, no 1–2). Their move was successful. Citing the need for the armed forces to 'adapt to the gender equality reform efforts in other areas of society' (Holmqvist, 1975, p. 175), the Minister of Defence announced the appointment of a committee tasked with drafting a reform proposal. In 1980, the first Swedish women could thus enter military training, on path to becoming officers. Referencing experiences from women's entry into the armed forces of Norway and the USA, the Swedish reform included all military positions, but was implemented through a step-by-step process over almost a decade. As was repeatedly emphasised, this was primarily done in order to help men in the ranks accustom themselves gradually to women colleagues (Ds Fö 1980; Sundevall, 2011).

The Scandinavian armed forces, however, were not so keen on welcoming more women once the matter had turned into a government-driven gender equality policy issue. There was also scepticism towards integrating women into capacities that had previously been inaccessible for women. The military leadership in Norway thus showed reluctance towards the 1973 committee recommendations. Increasing numbers of draftees opting for non-military national service or even conscientious objection, as well as the upcoming retirements of large age cohorts, had given rise to concerns over how to fill the ranks. Still, the military saw no critical need for recruiting women into military positions and voiced concerns over women's weaker physique impairing troop efficiency as well as practical obstacles, such as the unfeasibility of adjusting military barracks to house women (Orsten, 1999; Persson & Sundevall, 2019). In Denmark, the armed forces requested to be exempted from a 1978 law on equal treatment in the labour market, which made the existing ban on women's participation in combat and thus employment in combat-focused positions illegal. This caused many negotiations between the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Labour, and the Equality Council. In the end, the armed forces were granted a temporary exception, provided that trials with women in combat units were carried out in all three branches of the armed forces (Sløk-Andersen, 2014). In Sweden, a conflict over the implementation of the reforms ensued in the 1980s between the Commander-in-Chief and the Minister of Defence. The Commander initially opposed women in combat positions and moved on to claim there was insufficient medical evidence for granting women access to air and submarine troops. He also referred to high numbers of women drop-outs after 1983, which had allegedly proven the Swedish reform to be costly and disruptive (Sundevall, 2011).

Table 1. Women's formal access to military training, soldiering and officer positions in the Nordic countries' armed forces. Year when reforms entered into force.

Type of position	Denmark	Norway	Sweden	Finland
Non-combat	1974 Army 1975 Air Force 1976 Navy	1977	–	–
Combat	1988, with exceptions	1985	1980 Air Force, with exceptions 1983 Army and Navy, with exceptions	1995
Submarine	1988	1985	1989	1995
Fighter pilot	1992	1985	1989	1995
All, w/o exceptions	1992	1985	1989	1995
Gender integrated basic training	1998	1985	1980 Air Force Ground Troops 1983 All	1995

Sources: Holli 1999; Orsten, 1999; Author 2; Sløk-Andersen, 2014.

3.2. The 1980s: sweeping vs. gradual reform

The 1980s were characterised by discussions on how to deal with the differentiation between combat and non-combat positions that was presupposed in Danish and Norwegian regulations. In Norway, this differentiation, prescribed by parliament and modelled on the Danish reforms, turned out to be problematic to implement in practice, especially within the navy and the air force. Incremental extensions of the military tasks assigned to women were therefore made in Norway between 1977 and 1982, not primarily for purposes of advancing gender equality but rather in order to solve practical conundrums created by the parliamentary guidelines. The distinction between combat and non-combat positions came to be perceived as not only a hindrance to women's military careers, but also as a cause of unnecessary tensions and reluctance towards admitting women into certain military sectors. Both proponents and opponents of further reform in Norway in the early 1980s now pointed to the new Swedish model (NOU, 1982, 46; RAFA 5:1983). Sweden had decided on an all-embracing yet gradual reform, which was scheduled to be completed only a decade later. Swedish women were first allowed in all air force ground crew positions in 1980. Three years later, all remaining positions within the armed forces were opened, with the exception of airborne and submarine positions, which remained closed until 1989 (Sundevall, 2011).

In 1982, a Norwegian state committee proposed the introduction of full formal gender equality in Norway's armed forces, as well as the opening of conscript training to women on a voluntary basis (NOU, 1982, 46). The Norwegian army commanders initially wanted a more cautious and gradual approach when it came to the most demanding combat positions. The Norwegian ministry of defence, however, wanted full equality realised rapidly and put pressure on the military leadership. Once the headquarters yielded and pronounced its support for women's full integration, the proposed reforms were passed almost unanimously in parliament in 1984, and implemented in 1985–1986. The last branch to open was the army's engineer troops (Orsten, 1999).

In Denmark, a conclusion was reached only after years of trials and evaluations. An evaluation made by the Armed Forces' Leadership Centre in 1986 concluded that there were no grounds to exclude women from combat positions, as their abilities were 'completely at the same level as those of their male colleagues' (Schlüter, 1986, p. 5). The armed forces no longer had legitimate reasons for limiting women's access to military positions. The exception from the law on equal treatment granted to the armed forces was withdrawn in 1988. Women thereby gained access to all positions, including combat positions. Only one exception remained until 1992; women were not allowed to fly fighter jets until any potential effects on women's reproductive organs had been ruled out. With the introduction of a military basic training programme for women on 'conscript-like terms' in 1998, the presence of men and women was made increasingly similar, as the women-only units were replaced by mixed-gender units. The only gender difference left untouched throughout the period was that only male citizens were subjected to military conscription (Sløk-Andersen, 2014; Forsvarsudvalget, 1995).

In conclusion, the 1970s saw gender equality policies take over from recruitment needs as the main driving force. Women's further inclusion in military work was also driven by women already being present in the ranks. The legal foundation and possibility for advancement followed in the slipstream of women already doing military work. Developments were pushed forward by a new body of legislation ensuring women's rights in the labour market, step by step ruling out formal limitations on women's participation in military work. A third factor positively affecting the inclusion of women was a general crisis in terms of recruitment and status of the armed forces during the 1970s, which in all likelihood made it easier to accept a greater inclusion of women. The leadership of the armed forces, however, switched roles from driving on to stalling the process. This also applied to crucial decisions in the 1980s, when the military would have preferred more incremental reforms but was trumped by political forces that wanted immediate, sweeping reform. The fact that the military could not fend off these interventions by the state is an indication in itself of how the societal status of the military had been weakened.

4. Finland – an illuminating anomaly?

In Finland, there were only sporadic public discussions on women's military participation during the 1970s and 1980s. One important reason was that unlike in Scandinavia, no official institutions or organisations actively pursued the issue. Since *Lotta Svärd*, the main organisation for women's voluntary defence work, had been abolished after the war, there was no central organisation engaged in promoting women's military work and no strong presence of female volunteers in the armed forces. Neither did any concerns about the future recruitment of male personnel seem to have much troubled Finnish military leaders until the late 1980s. Developments in Scandinavia were certainly closely followed, and caused scattered efforts among journalists and individual citizens to raise the issue of women's military service in Finland. These efforts were, however, effectively counteracted by the combined forces of uninterested passivity among military leaders and passionate opposition to the idea of 'militarising women' from a motley alliance of feminist and peace organisations as well as left-wing political parties (Ahlbäck, 2022).

Towards the late 1980s and early 1990s, a change in attitudes took place in the political mainstream. This must in large part be attributed to the epochal changes of Finland's geopolitical environment, with the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union. The country entered a period of rapid re-assessment of its security policy doctrines. At the same time, a wave of 'neo-patriotism' swept through popular culture, marked by a rising celebration of the memory of Finland's defence of its independence in World War II and a surge of appreciation of the war veterans, including the female veterans of the *Lotta Svärd* (Kinnunen, 2006; Kinnunen & Jokisipilä, 2011).

A catalyst for changes within the military sphere was the appointment of Finland's first female minister of defence, Elisabeth Rehn, in 1990. Although her personal views on the issue of women's military work were conservative, Rehn introduced a new culture of open debate on military matters and inspired renewed discussion over women's participation. After being contacted by young women eager to do military service or enter a military career, Rehn appointed a parliamentary committee led by a known proponent of women's military participation (Rehn, 1991; Rehn & Snellman, 1998; Buure-Hägglund, 2001). In 1993, this committee proposed a sweeping reform, introducing voluntary military service for women and immediately opening officer training and all military positions to women. The committee argued both in terms of women's rights and organisational efficiency. Referring to experiences in the Scandinavian countries, it was argued that the presence of women improved the working atmosphere in military units and that female training officers complemented their male colleagues through a different leadership style (NSM, 1993).

The push for reform in Finland came from civil society and the Ministry of Defence rather than from within the armed forces. The main driving forces, it can be concluded, were the general decline of traditional gender barriers in the Finnish labour market in combination with the neopatriotic wave and the nearby positive examples of the Scandinavian countries. Although the military at no point expressed any particular need for broadening the recruitment base to women, the Finnish headquarters in 1992–1993 concluded that there was no particular reason to resist a reform, as long as the bedrock of mandatory male conscription was left untouched (Defence Command of Finland, 1993).

A further factor launching the belated reform in Finland was that a coalition government consisting of the most pro-defence right-wing and centre-right parties took office in 1991. The content and motivations of its reform bill in 1994 conformed closely with a traditionally rightist, positive assessment of the armed forces and conscription system in their existing forms, combined with an emphasis on women's individual freedom of choice and a liberalistic view of gender equality. The left-wing parties, especially their women's organisations, as well as feminist organisations, resisted these reforms throughout (Holli 1999; Ahlbäck, 2022). The reform was passed as legislation by parliament in early 1995 and promptly implemented by the armed forces. Women were accommodated in separate dormitories, but otherwise fully integrated into the same units as the male conscripts (HE 131/1994).

In sum, the factors that propelled women's military integration 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 organisations pushing for a reform. In the geopolitical thaw after 1990, a sudden militarisation of notions of female citizenship followed in the wake of neo-patriotism and the normalisation of (formal) gender equality in the labour market. The positive Scandinavian experiences of integrating female volunteers in the armed forces and the individual agency of Finland's first female minister of defence were also decisive for the belated Finnish reform.

5. Comparative discussion

What, then, can this overview of four Nordic countries tell us about the reasons and motives behind women's military integration? The end result appears to be an outcome of progressive gender equality policies, but as we have seen, the process was driven on by an interplay of economic and military factors on the one hand and ideologies of gender equality on the other hand. The shift towards an integration process propelled by politics of gender equality in the 1970s was gradual, followed different paths in each country and displayed a variety of interpretations of gender equality. Such step-by-step processes have several international counterparts, with women being barred from submarine and fighter pilot positions in most countries around the world into at least the 1990s.

In this section, we develop the comparison between the four national cases and discuss the significance of different driving forces, the issue of women's military inclusion as an accumulative process, the duality of military work as both civic duty and professional career, and finally the shifting understandings of gender equality in the military sphere.

5.1. The dynamics of labour demand, ideology and continuity

We have pointed to a long arch of development, where the Scandinavian armed forces became increasingly dependent on women's non-combat military labour during the post-war period. Positive experiences of women's involvement during World War II combined with an increasing shortage of male personnel due to falling birth-rates and the prolonged economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s. The military leadership had a decisive role in promoting women's military integration in these early stages, yet predominantly into functions and support tasks considered auxiliary and limited by traditional gender boundaries. Especially within the air forces of Denmark and Sweden, the military commanders welcomed women in increasingly advanced technical tasks, yet always in non-combat and on-ground support positions.

Women were a vast but above all cheap labour reserve, as women's military involvement largely continued in the pre-war and wartime tradition of volunteer work within the *Lotta/Lotte* associations and other similar frameworks for women's unpaid military work. In this sense, women's involvement in the military sphere was in this early period rather constructed as a form of civic participation than as professional military work. In both Norway and Sweden, even notions of some form of military conscription for women surfaced in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Hence, it would be a simplification to state that the driving forces for women's integration in the post-war decades were purely economic. Rather, recruitment needs blended with ideological elements.

The gendered division of labour that assigned women exclusively non-combat tasks, often considered to be of secondary importance, was obviously an ideological construct. Moreover, there were strong ideological aspects to the notions that women needed to be included in the work for national preparedness. Defence was seen as a national effort in which all resources of society had to be mobilised. Not least to the women who performed demanding tasks on a voluntary and

unpaid basis, ideological notions of civic participation and patriotic contribution were in all likelihood important, although voluntary defence work naturally could also be fulfilling as an interesting hobby and social activity.

The continued influx of women in a wide range of military functions created a problematic ambiguity over the status, obligations and rights of these women in a situation of wartime mobilisation. In both Norway and Denmark, the reforms granting women access to military status and employment were thus initiated mainly from within the military sphere. They were motivated by an increasing need to regulate the status of women already working voluntarily in defence, as well as the need to make military work more attractive to contemporary women. At the same time, the gender order of male breadwinner and female housewife waned during the 1960s. Nordic women increasingly entered the labour market (where they had, of course, always been present to a large extent) as well as previously male-only professions. As a consequence, the future availability of unpaid women, neither conscripted nor properly employed, using their leisure hours for military work, seemed increasingly uncertain.

In Norway, the 1973 committee proposal to open non-combat military positions to women was predominantly based on military recruitment needs and a military agenda of making non-armed service more attractive to women. The Danish reforms in 1962 and 1971 that granted women military status were likewise legislative reactions to practical and organisational problems within the armed forces. The Swedish air force commander who instigated the first investigation into conscript training for women in 1969 was evidently also concerned primarily about staffing, not gender equality. However, these processes internal to the military happened to coincide with the emergence of gender equality politics in the surrounding societies. Around the mid-1970s, various proposals of granting or extending women's military status in all three Scandinavian countries rather suddenly came to be discussed by politicians in terms of promoting women's rights in the military professions. In that sense, one might say that the integration of women in the armed forces entered a double crisis in the early 1970s, as problems internal to the existing structures came to the fore at the same time as fundamental principles underlying these structures were problematised from the outside.

The Finnish case is an illuminating aberration from the Scandinavian pattern of demand-driven, continuous presence of women in hybrid military capacities. In spite of highly similar military recruitment and organisational models, women's voluntary defence work never regained the same volume and significance in Finland as in the Scandinavian countries during the Cold War. The political reasons had to do with the stigmatisation of the wartime *Lotta* movement as anti-Soviet and militaristic. Finnish gender equality politics, otherwise largely developing along the same lines as in the Scandinavian countries through the 1970s and 1980s (Julkunen, 2010) thus conspicuously never picked up the topic of women's rights in the military sphere. This concurred with economic factors, as there was no lack of male military staff and thus no particular military needs for recruiting women.

5.2. Military women and politicians as game changers

Why then did the mid-1970s see a shift towards an integration process propelled by politics of gender equality in the Scandinavian countries? A central observation is that gender equality was never an objective of the military organisations themselves during this period. Whenever the military organisations advocated women's integration, it was with reference to labour demands. Gender equality considerations were rather forced on them from the outside. However, women already active within the military sphere exerted an important agency and influence when women were first granted military status in all three Scandinavian countries. In the case of Norway, the female inspectors overseeing the women's service pushed for raising the status of female military staff ever since the 1950s. In Sweden, the *Lotta* association advocated better working conditions for their members throughout the Cold War period and together with the liberal women's rights movement

in the mid-1970s put pressure on political decisionmakers to move forward with opening military employment to women. In contemporary Denmark, women already in military employment pushed for increased career opportunities, making use of references to recent gender equality legislation.

The decisive agency in the matter was nonetheless exercised by politicians in governments and parliaments. It is difficult to discern any clear party political or right-left divide over the issue. The decisive reforms were passed more or less unanimously in both the Swedish and Norwegian parliaments. Gender equality was broadly embraced by all major Nordic parties in the 1970s, with the most comprehensive policies generally favoured by socialist parties. In Sweden, however, the Liberal party early on promoted a radical gender equality agenda. The new gender equality politics in the Nordic countries in this period had an emphasis on facilitating women's wage work. Here, ideology and labour market needs went hand in hand: the growing economy and expanding public sector were in dire need of women's labour (Borchorst, 1999; Florin & Nilsson, 1999; Julkunen, 2010).

In Norway and Sweden in the 1970s, and to an even higher degree in Finland during the 1980s, resistance towards these reforms was also connected with left-wing parties with antimilitarist traditions, as well as the new women's movement and the peace movement (Ahlbäck, 2022; Orsten, 1999). For example, the only opponents in the Swedish parliament when the final decisions on allowing women were made were the MPs of the Communist party. They argued that the framing of the reform as a matter of gender equality in the labour market was a diversion designed to draw attention away from the aims and organisational structure of the armed forces (VPK 1978, 1981). Similar criticism was articulated by the chair of the Swedish section of the Women's League for Peace and Freedom (Segerstedt Wiberg, 1977).

Political groups and social movements critical of the armed forces in general tended to take a negative view of integrating women in institutions they considered militarist and masculinist. Vice versa, parties and organisations towards the conservative-liberal end of the political spectre showed a tendency to be particularly keen on these reforms. A common denominator of the Scandinavian 1970s reforms was a shift of understandings of women's military participation away from notions of civic duty (and thus unpaid labour), towards labour market rights and military careers as career opportunities for women. Once the matter was framed as a voluntary and individual choice for women, the reform proposals fitted well within both a liberal view on women's rights and a pro-defence stance in security policy matters. Even if women's right to military work was still often seen as contrary to military efficiency, there was an understanding already during the 1970s that women's military participation strengthened the general will and ability of the nation to defend itself (NOU 1973, 37).

5.3. Towards a Nordic model of military gender equality?

In spite of their differences, the Nordic countries also increasingly looked to each other for examples and experiences of women's military integration. Norwegian policymakers looked to Denmark for models when investigating women's access to non-combat positions in the early 1970s and shifted focus to the Swedish model when combat positions were under consideration in the early 1980s. Swedish investigators in the mid-1970s scrupulously accounted for Danish and Norwegian arrangements when outlining the upcoming Swedish reforms.

Denmark and Norway both passed through an intermediate phase where women's right to military work was acknowledged as a matter of gender equality in the labour market, at the same time as women were restricted to so-called non-combat positions. At this stage, a growing recognition of women's rights was still perfectly compatible with strong notions of essential gender differences in men's and women's abilities and suitability for different military tasks. Although admitted to officer training and special courses, women were assigned to separate training tracks and not integrated in the basic training for male conscripts that formed the basis for all further military

education for men. In both Denmark and Norway, this might be seen as a consequence of the 1970s reforms aiming at expanding existing structures for women's military work in a rather organic fashion.

Sweden seemingly opted for a more radical reform in 1979, as it was decided that all military positions were to be gradually opened to women and women's basic training integrated with the male training units. Yet even here, gender equality was in many ways conditional. Women's access to military work was throughout the reform process discussed as a labour market reform, a women's rights issue and a career choice for a small number of women, whereas men's military work was chiefly understood as a matter of civic duty and mandatory military training under universal conscription. Until 1995, an intent to enter a professional military career was actually a condition for a woman to be admitted to the basic military training programme (Persson & Sundevall, 2019; Sundevall, 2011).

Even as first Norway and then Denmark followed Sweden in opening combat tasks to women, the Scandinavian reforms through the 1970s and 1980s were marked by an understanding of men and women as equal but different; equal in rights but different in obligations and gendered societal tasks. Restricting voluntary women to non-combat tasks, however, was increasingly found incompatible with the demands of modern warfare and a hindrance on women's equal career opportunities. In terms of the duality of military service as both civic duty and professional career, the 1990s also saw the gradual emergence of a new synthesis, where women's right to participate in military service *both* as a civic duty and as a professional career were highlighted.

The Nordic model of equal rights, but different obligations, in relation to military work turned out to be quite successful. Granting women the right to military service, yet putting them under no obligation, proved to satisfy both public opinion and the majority of political parties as a sufficient amount of military gender equality for the time being. The attractiveness of this model was confirmed by Finland's swift move to adopt a similar system for women's voluntary military service in the early 1990s. By this time, the Scandinavian militaries could provide Finnish politicians with evidence of gender diversity actually increasing instead of taxing organisational efficiency. In the Finnish reform process, as well as in contemporary Scandinavian recruitment campaigns directed at women, gender equality – or rather, gender diversity – could now be presented as not only a societal value but also a military objective.

One might ask how unique this 'Nordic model' of gender and military work actually was to the four Nordic countries. We use the term mainly in order to point out the mutual interaction and convergence among the four Nordic countries. They converged around combining full voluntary access to all military positions for women with the strategic decision to hold on to universal male conscription throughout the 1990s and 2000s – a period of apparent international détente when several European countries such as France (1996), the Netherlands (1997), Spain (2001) and the Czech republic (2004) abolished conscription (see e.g. Joensuu, 2006 ed.).

A global comparison of this model with paths taken by other countries would require further research. However, according to a large survey of women's military participation in all NATO countries, carried out by Carreiras (2006), this particular combination was actually rather unusual up until the year 2000 when her data was collected. The only non-Nordic country cited by Carreiras to have combined universal male conscription with full formal integration of women – i.e. no gender restrictions concerning combat duty or special branches – was Belgium, where all military positions were opened to women in 1980. Belgium, however, abolished conscription already in 1995, opting for voluntary recruitment of both men and women.

Carreiras underlines that overall female representation – the percentage of women among the total of military personnel – tends to be lower in countries with conscripted mass armies. An index constructed by Carreiras to measure the total level of gender integration in the armed forces, weighing in not only formal access but also the overall percentage of women in the forces and their representation in the higher ranks, awarded the US and Canada the highest overall level of gender integration among the NATO countries. These countries both based their armed forces on voluntary enlistment.

Norway, in third place, and Denmark, in seventh place, scored high on formal inclusiveness, but rather low on actual representation of women (Carreiras, 2006). The score of Sweden and Finland would have been similar to that of Norway and Denmark, had they been included, due to the lower total percentage of women in military service when compared to the US, Canada or the UK. Carreiras does not, however, take into account that the ratio of male military personnel to the country's total population is also vastly higher in countries with conscript armies, when the trained reserves are included. This can make the representation of Nordic women in the forces appear small in comparison to the amount of male personnel, although the share of women choosing a military career might be the same or even higher than in countries with smaller armed forces.

Unique or not, the particular 'Nordic model' of gender and military work stayed in place for longer in the Nordic countries than in Belgium. As time passed, however, there was growing political unease especially in Sweden and Norway with the gender asymmetry of military rights for women and military obligations for men. Finland and Denmark have essentially retained the legislations finalised in the 1990s, but Norway moved on to implement a completely gender-neutral military conscription system in 2015. Sweden introduced gender-neutral conscription in 2010, but at once deactivated conscription for both men and women, only to reactivate it in 2017 with reference to heightened security threats in the Baltic region as well as recruitment difficulties under the intermediate, fully voluntary system (Persson & Sundevall, 2019).

A possible explanation for this split between the Nordic countries might be the tradition of stronger institutionalisation of gender equality politics in Sweden and Norway, relative to Finland and Denmark (Borchorst et al. 1999). Borchorst, Christensen and Raaum exemplify this by stating that in Sweden and Norway, gender equality work is supported by far wider research and evaluation efforts than in Finland and Denmark. This also seems to be the case when it comes to the making of gender equality policies related to the armed forces, where Sweden and Norway have issued more state evaluations and reports on women in the armed forces than Denmark and Finland.

In practice, the introduction of gender-neutral conscription in Norway and Sweden entailed a transition to voluntary service, as recruitment is highly selective, in the early 2020s comprising around 4 percent of the age class in Sweden and around 16 percent in Norway (NAF, 2021; SAF, 2021). The cultural taboo around forcing women into military service, in the same way as men have been for centuries, thus remains unbroken.

6. Conclusion

In this article, we have traced the political processes towards full formal integration of women in the armed forces of Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, from the post-war era until the 1990s. Combining previous research done on individual countries by ourselves and other researchers, we have provided the first comparative overview and analysis of these developments in the Nordic region. A main contribution in relation to previous research is that we demonstrate the crucial importance of historical continuity in women's military participation. Grounded in positive experiences of women's military participation during World War II and propelled by military labour demand, women were throughout the post-war decades recruited into a range of auxiliary, voluntary and hybrid capacities in the Swedish, Danish and Norwegian armed forces. When gender equality in the labour market entered the political discourse in the 1970s, women were thus already strongly present in the military sphere. We have described the reforms in Denmark, Norway and Sweden as the outcome of a double crisis, as military reform processes aiming at regulating and clarifying these women's organisational status coincided with new political demands for women's rights. Finland, as we have shown, lacked both such a continuity in women's military participation and similar military staff-shortages. In combination with political and geopolitical factors, this delayed women's military integration in Finland for almost twenty years.

Our analysis largely confirms previous theoretical understandings that have highlighted lack of male labour and increasingly egalitarian social values about gender, among others, as factors driving

women's military integration. In the Nordic countries, however, the armed forces remained fundamentally based on universal male conscription. Women's military integration in the period up until the 1990s thus cannot be associated with any general shift towards voluntary military recruitment. This shift only took place some twenty years later, with the introduction of gender-neutral, selective conscription in Norway and Sweden.

Another important conclusion is that although women's relatively early military integration in the Scandinavian countries in hindsight might appear as parallel outcomes of similar political cultures attaching great importance to gender equality, the process displayed a variety of different and changing understandings of gender equality in the military sphere. Denmark and Norway initially tried out a model of admitting women to 'non-combat' positions. Swedish policymakers decided that such a division was impracticable, yet foresaw the need of an almost decades-long transition phase before the most physically demanding positions were opened to women. Finland, benefitting from the previous trials and experiences in the Scandinavian countries, made a sudden move to what by then was emerging as a transitory Nordic model of gender and military work, marked by equal rights to military participation for women on a voluntary basis combined with mandatory military conscription for men.

Acknowledgements

The authors are very grateful to Ph.D. Beate Sløk-Andersen for providing us with previous research on the Danish case as well as for commenting on drafts for this paper. We would also like to thank Alma Persson, Dag Ellingsen and Ulla-Britt Lilleaas for valuable comments on earlier versions of this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This study was carried out within the research project 'Gender Equality, Diversity and Societal Security', supported by the NordForsk under Grant 88041.

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