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To cite this article: Alma Persson & Fia Sundevall (2019): Conscripting women: gender, soldiering, and military service in Sweden 1965–2018, Women's History Review, DOI: 10.1080/09612025.2019.1596542

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2019.1596542

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Published online: 22 Mar 2019.

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Conscripting women: gender, soldiering, and military service in Sweden 1965–2018

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ABSTRACT
This article explores how women, men, and gender equality in the military have been debated, made sense of, regulated, and dealt with in Swedish contemporary history. It takes its empirical point of departure in 1965, when the issue of military conscription for women was first raised in Sweden, and ends with the implementation of so called gender-neutral conscription in 2018. The study is based on a wide range of sources, collected through a combination of extensive archival work, ethnographic studies, and interviews. The analysis shows how men have been the standard against which women were measured throughout the period studied. Women service members were simultaneously perceived both as a problem and as a solution to a range of problems in the organisation. Women’s ‘different’ bodies were considered problematic, while staff shortages and demands for specific personnel qualities rendered the ‘woman soldier’ a solution, in particular in relation to international missions.

KEYWORDS
Conscription; national service; gender equality; military employment; military officers; Swedish Armed Forces

Introduction

In the summer of 2018, 4000 Swedish nineteen-year-olds began their military service.¹ For the first time in the nation’s history, both women and men were compulsorily enlisted into the military.² This marked the end of a process that began in the 1960s, when the highly controversial issue of military conscription for women was first raised. It also positioned Sweden as the second country in the world, after Norway, to conscript men and women on equal terms.³

This article represents the first scholarly effort to map out and analyse the process of gender integration of military positions and training in Sweden. It provides an overview of continuity and change pertaining to gender relations in the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) over the last 50 years. The aim is to explore how women, men, and gender equality in the SAF have been debated, made sense of, regulated, and dealt with in Sweden since the 1960s. More specifically, it investigates the ways in which women have been constructed as either a problem or a solution in relation to military labour.

Historian Anna Maria Forssberg and ethnologist Anna Fredholm have argued that ‘the story of [Swedish] conscription is a story of Sweden’.⁴ For more than a century, the
The conscription system has impacted, been affected by, and interacted with Swedish society in fundamental ways. It has been closely intertwined with the democratisation process, the constructions of citizenship, and gender relations. Historians such as Lina Sturfelt and Pontus Rudberg have described the conscription system as integral to defining and redefining men’s citizenship within the Swedish modernisation project; moulding good male citizens within the welfare state. While many other nations abandoned conscription during the Cold War, replacing it with all-volunteer forces, Sweden—like its neighbours Norway and Finland—has kept its conscription system more or less intact.

The present study ties in with previous historical and contemporary research on gender, work and military organisations, adding to existing knowledge on gender equality and social policy, citizenship, and divisions of military labour. The analysis is based on the idea that gender relations in any society are intimately intertwined with issues of war, militarisation and military institutions. While most research on military work and organisations lack a gender perspective, there is a growing field of research that analyses and theorises on the complex connections between gender and the military: from gender relations and practices in a specific military context and time period, to how notions of nation, war, and peace can be understood as inherently gendered.

Military organisations have a long-standing history of male domination, numerically and symbolically. This is still the case today. At the beginning of the millennium, only six out of nearly 200 nations had a share of women larger than 5% in their armed forces. These women were mostly employed in positions traditionally associated with femininity, such as secretarial work or nursing. Additionally, the soldier is often described as an archetypical symbol of masculinity. Military organisations in general, and their combat units in particular, have, as sociologist Helena Carreira has pointed out, frequently been understood as ‘a proving ground for masculinity’. As such, the military is both a gendered and gendering institution. We therefore argue that issues of women’s and men’s presence, rights, and obligations in the military are of great societal relevance, affecting far more than local workplace conditions.

The Swedish case is of special interest both because of the nation’s self-image and international reputation as a bastion of gender equality since the 1970s, and the recent implementation of a so called gender-neutral conscription system. An analysis of how women, men, and gender equality have been debated, made sense of, regulated, and dealt with in the SAF during these crucial decades (1965–2018), contributes to a deeper understanding of Swedish gender equality policy as well as demonstrates the need for a more nuanced understanding of gender equality efforts in military organisations. The analysis of the Swedish case shows that the process towards increased gender equality has not been a linear one, and that contradictory discourses of women as both a problem and solution have coexisted throughout the studied period.

**Source material and methods**

The study draws on a wide range of sources, collected through a combination of extensive archival work, ethnographic methods, and interviews. The main body of empirical material was compiled during two research projects. The first was an analysis of gender divisions of military labour in contemporary Sweden (1965–2000), with a particular focus on the process of opening the military professions up to women. The second
was a study in the field of gender, work, and organisation that analysed the SAF’s turn from a national to an international defence organisation, and the transformation of perceptions concerning gender, equality, and military labour that came with it. The present article brings together results from these previous projects and expands upon them by asking new questions and adding further empirical material, primarily from government and military archives.

We take our methodological point of departure in poststructuralist policy analysis, as developed by political scientist Carol Lee Bacchi in her ‘What’s the problem (represented to be)?’ approach. This framework urges scholars to analyse ‘the implicit problem representation within a specific policy or policy proposal’ Inspired by this framework, we have analysed the source material by asking: What is described as a problem (in society, in the workplace, in a specific military branch)? What are the underlying presuppositions or assumptions in the ‘problem representation’ and how did these come about? What, and who, is left unproblematised? This approach shows how ‘the problems’ of women (and, in some cases, men) in the military workplace have been formulated, contested, and re-articulated over time.

The article’s empirical sections are chronologically structured. We start with the process that enabled women to serve in all positions and branches of the SAF and end with the recent reform that conscripts women and men on equal terms. Figure 1 presents an overview of formative moments and key steps in this process.

**Challenging and reinforcing the men-only conscription system**

Throughout the twentieth century, recruitment of military personnel to the SAF was done primarily through the compulsory enlistment of male citizens. While the conscription of women had been a recurring topic of debate since the late 1800s, it had centred on nursing and various kinds of reproductive labour, framed as the feminine equivalent to men’s military roles. This changed in the mid-1960s when young liberals (members of the People’s Party’s youth league) called for gender-neutral military conscription, and for women’s access to officers’ positions. Although framed as a matter of gender equality, which fitted well with the political discourse at the time of advancing women’s rights—especially in the labour market—it caused a stir, and became the subject of heated debate in the media to the point that the SAF head office felt the need to address the matter, making a case for the already established men-only system. At the same time as the proposal by the young liberals was being debated and ridiculed in the press, the head of the Air Force initiated a secret investigation into the possibility of employing women in military and civil-military positions. While the initiative of the young liberals should be understood within the context of contemporary debates on women’s rights and liberal ideals of equal rights and obligations, the Air Force’s investigation was first and foremost an attempt to solve its problems of personnel shortages.

The shortage of military personnel was a direct consequence of Sweden’s low birthrates in the 1920s and 1930s, which had left the nation with a steady decline in men of conscription age since the 1940s. This in turn meant that fewer people received the training required for civil–military and military occupations. Further complicating the situation was the shortage of personnel in several sectors of the Swedish labour force as a result
of an economic boom and alarms about projected male labour shortages for the next 15 years. As part of solving this problem, the Swedish government took measures to increase the labour force participation of the nation’s major labour reserve: women. This included, amongst others: publicly-funded childcare, paid parental leave for men, and the introduction of individualised income taxation for spouses. The reform work to advance women’s rights on the labour market was thus largely driven by manpower-related objectives, as was the case with the investigation initiated by the Air Force.

As anticipated, the Air Force’s investigation concluded that women could not be considered for the occupations in question, owing to the fact that they were not conscripted. 

Figure 1. Gender equality and the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF), 1965–2018.
Only within conscription service could the basic military training, which was required for all civil–military and military occupations, be acquired.\textsuperscript{28} Hence, such positions were closed off to women, in the same way that nursing occupations had been for men until 1951 due to men’s exclusion from certified nursing training.\textsuperscript{29}

Reactions to the young liberals’ proposals had indicated that there was little to no military or public support for gender-neutral conscription. Nevertheless, the matter was investigated by a state committee in the early 1970s, following a request from the Commander of the Air Force. The committee concluded not only that conscription should remain men-only. It also added that should military and civil–military occupations be opened up to women, then women would have to receive training outside the conscription system.\textsuperscript{30} This was also the standpoint of the Social Democratic government which, in 1975, commissioned another state committee to prepare for the integration of women to military positions by means other than conscription. By then, and contrary to predictions, the Air Force no longer suffered any personnel shortages, and therefore had lost the incentive to recruit women. For the government, however, this issue had become a matter of credibility in terms of gender equality related policy.

In the ten years that had passed since the young liberals first made demands for gender-neutral conscription and women’s access to military occupations, Sweden had begun to portray itself, nationally and internationally, as a leading nation in gender equality.\textsuperscript{31} Formal barriers for women in the labour market did not sit comfortably with that image. Men-only conscription was, however, considered less of a problem, and was even added as an exception to the constitution’s new ban against gender-discriminatory laws and regulations.\textsuperscript{32} Therefore, military obligations were yet again confirmed as natural tasks for men, while women’s right to have access to military occupations was framed as a gender equality issue.

**The last male bastion: women and combat**

With the appointment of the 1975 state committee, the question was no longer whether or not women would be allowed to serve as military officers but rather how to implement such a reform and what types of officer positions/specialities should be made available. The answer to the first question became clear at an early stage: a new, entirely voluntary-based recruitment system was to be created for women, and run in parallel with the conscription-based recruitment of men; that is, women would be given the option to sign up for and, if they passed the admission tests, undergo basic military training for a professional military officer position, alongside the conscripted men.

The second question, of what officer positions/specialties would be made available to women, became the subject of heated debate and negotiations.\textsuperscript{33} According to the instructions from the Minister of Defence, the mandate of the state committee was initially to focus on non-combat positions only, since positions involving tasks not characterised by combat may for this reason ‘be filled with women too’.\textsuperscript{34} This suggested that women were not only less suited for combat than men but that there was also some form of intrinsic opposition between women and combat. Combat has always been a distinct point of contention when discussing gender divisions of labour in the military. During this particular period, few countries, if any, allowed women in combat positions.\textsuperscript{35}
However, separating combat from non-combat positions proved complicated, as there was no military policy on how to discern between the two types of positions. Additionally, the committee appointed to prepare the implementation of the reform questioned the suitability and relevance of using combat as a selection criterion in the first place, arguing that all soldiers serving in these times of ‘total wars’ must be considered combatants. This division between combat and non-combat positions was eventually discarded in the additional instructions given to the state committee in 1978 by the new liberal government. The committee was now instructed to make proposals on how to continue the process towards ‘a gender neutral professional military officer positions in the future’, without limits to branches or specialisation.

In 1980, women were granted access to the Air Force ground service. This was the first of a three-step process that eventually opened up all military positions to women. The second step was taken in 1982 when almost all remaining positions were made available for women and men alike. The third and last step was taken in 1989, opening up the few positions that were still closed for women: tactical air service and submarine service (i.e. combat pilots, divers, and various submarine positions). From that point on, there were no longer any formal limitations for women wishing to pursue a career in the Swedish Armed Forces. A few years later, in 1995, women could also undertake basic military training without having to commit to becoming full-fledged professional military officers.

The order in which the military positions above were opened up to women was informed by the careful weighing of different factors and arguments. The steps of the process also mirrored developments in many other European nations, where ground and non-combat positions were also the first to open up for women, while submarine and fighter pilot positions either remained inaccessible for a longer time or still do today.

‘Different below the chin’: women’s bodies in a man’s world

The end of the male monopoly of military officer positions is inextricably linked to perceptions of women’s bodies as different from men’s. ‘The physical capacity of women—is it enough in a men’s world?’ read the headline of a special issue of the Swedish National Defence Research Institute’s journal in 1980. Beginning with reports detailing scientific evidence about women’s physical strength and absorption of oxygen in the military context, the journal also scrutinised women’s reproductive abilities, asking how menstruation, pregnancy, and breastfeeding were to be handled in the military. The report even issued a warning for birth defects, if pregnant women were to work in some of the more specialised positions in tactical aviation or the submarine service.

It was an amalgamation of assumptions, opinions, and scientific findings comparing female and male bodies that formed a key area for the discussion, preparation, and implementation of the gender-neutral military reform. Interspersed were deeply-rooted assumptions of men as natural soldiers and protectors, juxtaposed to the idea of women as civilians in need of protection. ‘We are the same above the chin, but not below’, supreme commander Stig Synnergren argued in a 1975 debate on women’s access to military officer positions. ‘It’s what we men have below the chin that we shall use in the military’. Women and their bodies also featured in discussions about the costs of material and spatial adjustments; that is, re-building airplanes and producing equipment for bodies other than that of the generic nineteen-year-old man, and setting
up additional toilet facilities, showers, and lodging in the barracks, in order to physically separate the bodies of men and women.\textsuperscript{43} 

While many bodily and medical matters were thoroughly investigated, others were left out for economic reasons. For example, conducting a study on the submarine environment and its effect on female bodies was not deemed cost-effective, as it was assumed that only a handful of women would show interest in such jobs. For this reason, and because pregnancies were expected to make women’s years as active pilots fewer than men’s, the Supreme Commander called for submarine and pilot positions to remain men-only.\textsuperscript{44} In sum, the female body was considered a potential problem in the military, simply because it differed from the male norm.

**Not too fast, not too few: dealing with male resistance**

The gradually granted access of women to the professional positions in the military triggered a male backlash.\textsuperscript{45} In fact, expected resistance from men was one of the main reasons why a three-stage reform had been agreed upon. The chiefs of the military branches, the Supreme Commander and the 1975 state committee all agreed that male commanders’ attitudes towards female colleagues would be an obstacle in implementing the reform. In particular, there was concern about the Navy, since it was considered to be the most conservative of the military branches.\textsuperscript{46} The solution proposed, then, was to have men slowly adjust to the presence of women officers by introducing the latter only gradually, and never appoint one or only a few women in each unit, as the mistakes of one woman might be interpreted as a sign that all women were incapable of military leadership.\textsuperscript{47} Thus, managing men’s resistance against women as commanding officers boiled down to achieving a delicate balance between slowly getting men used to the idea and achieving just the right percentage of women in a unit; that is, not too fast or too many, not too slow or too few.

The concerns about men’s attitudes proved to be well-founded. ‘The biggest nuisance during basic training was the attitudes of the guys. We were kind of on their turf and did just as well as them actually—things like that hit a nerve with guys in their 20s’, as one of the first women in the Coastal Artillery’s training summarised her experience in 1984.\textsuperscript{48} She was far from alone. A considerable number of the women who had started their basic military training in the 1980s dropped out, referring largely to their negative male attitudes, especially those of their commanding officers. The problems appear to have been most prominent in the Army, where nearly a third of the women had dropped out by 1988.\textsuperscript{49}

The male backlash took many forms. In interviews conducted in 2005 with female officers, who had completed their basic military training in the 1980s, one respondent described the presence of porn magazines and movies as an everyday occurrence, when she did her training on a submarine as the only woman on board. When objecting to the situation, she was told that she had only herself to blame: ‘you chose to do this so it’s your problem’.\textsuperscript{50} The interviewed officer sharing this experience felt that frequent and open consumption of pornography was partly an attempt to spite her. In other words, she perceived it as an expression of her male colleagues’ resistance towards the presence of a female colleague. Similar stories abound in the interviews. The informants described how their competence was questioned on a regular basis, with colleagues...
openly stating that women were not suitable for military work, and that they suffered various forms of sexual harassment. One officer who was the first woman in that position in her Army regiment stated that she received anonymous phone calls at night, threatening to ‘do whatever it takes to get rid of you’.51

The human suffering, combined with the economic consequences of the SAF investing in training of staff that left prematurely, called for measures to deal with the problem. The immediate solution was, however, not to address men’s resistance and attitudes towards their female colleagues but to pause the recruitment of women altogether to those units that had the largest number of withdrawals. Yet the Supreme Commander, who had always been reluctant to open all military positions to women, suggested that changing men’s ‘attitudes and values’ through staff development efforts would be a better remedy.52 This, as the following section will show, represents the first step towards an entirely new way of framing gender equality in the SAF.

**Mars and Venus: women as a complementary resource**

The women officers who were interviewed about their experiences of entering the military in the 1980s all described very similar experiences of male resistance. However, the ways in which they made sense of and dealt with these experiences differed. As described above, a number of women chose to leave the military altogether. Others decided to fight back, literally, for example when groped by a colleague at a party. Yet others proved themselves worthy by running faster than their antagonists on the 10-kilometer track. Some cried at night, but were sure to play along and ‘take it’ during the day so that they would not be perceived as weak.53

A much debated issue amongst the first cohorts of women was the term ‘woman officer’, and the question of whether or not gender was a relevant point of identification for service members in the SAF. In a memo to the Supreme Commander in 1992, six officers at the Halmstad Air Defence Regiment stated that they considered themselves to be ‘officers, no more and no less’ and that they declined participation in various surveys and meetings for women officers, since they ‘have a job to do’.54 Similarly, when a network for women officers was established in 1997, aimed at strengthening ‘women officers’ as a group and providing a space for sharing experiences,55 several women rejected the basic premises of the network—women’s need for such a space and the notion of shared experiences based on gender—, as well as the term ‘woman officer’ altogether.56

The scepticism towards affirmative action relating to women officers must be understood in the context of the immense focus directed towards the relatively few women in the SAF, and the many political and military initiatives to evaluate their experiences, and to make sure the reform was implemented as smoothly as possible. While some women welcomed such efforts, others felt it did more to reinforce the idea that they were inherently different from their male colleagues.

Differences between men and women had been a continuous focal point throughout the 1970s and 1980s reforms but took a new turn in the early 1990s with the launch of project KREOL, an acronym for ‘kreativa olikheten’, the creative difference. According to organisational scholar Anders W. Berggren, the project was initiated by the Supreme Commander as a means to increase efficiency in military work by engineering a change in service
members’ attitudes about ‘difference’, in particular regarding gender. Based on notions of gender complementarity, it promoted and taught insights about the ‘cultural differences’ between women and men, and the ways in which these differences complemented each other in productive ways.\(^{57}\) Compared to the 1975 statement from the Supreme Commander that men and women were different ‘below the chin’ and that it was that part of the body that was important in military work, the KREOL version suggested rather the opposite, namely that men and women were different from the chin up and that these differences could work to everyone’s advantage if addressed in the right way.

KREOL, which became the trademark of the SAF’s equality work in the 1990s, was a form of diversity training that reflected and was part of the wave of gender-complementarity ideas permeating Swedish discourse in the early 1990s, which appear to have had particular appeal for various leadership schemes.\(^{58}\) Seemingly inspired by the central metaphor of John Gray’s 1992 bestselling book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (published in Swedish translation the same year),\(^{59}\) such projects claimed that women and men were fundamentally different and that employers must find a way for them to function together and make the best of their differences.

The KREOL project was hence based on the idea of gender as a binary opposition, suggesting that women’s main contribution to the SAF was found in their alleged difference as ‘women officers’ or deviation from the male officers’ norm. Thereby, issues of equal opportunities and structural power relations were marginalised.\(^{60}\)

‘Use the woman soldier!’: gender equality on the international arena

By the end of the 1990s, the notions of difference that had characterised the SAF’s gender equality work for most of the decade were increasingly called into question, and gradually replaced by a new strategy based on another form of problem representation.\(^{61}\) Rather than the complementary approach of KREOL, gender power relations and structural inequalities became problematised. As a consequence, the focus shifted towards the gendered organisational structure, combatting sexual harassment and making sure women and men had equal career opportunities and the ability to combine work with parenting. In order to oversee, support, and organise the work, a gender equality officer was employed in the personnel division at SAF headquarters.\(^{62}\)

At the turn of the millennium, gender equality was also increasingly connected to the ongoing transition from national territorial defence to international peacekeeping. When the SAF renewed its gender equality action plan in 2006, it emphasised women’s contributions to ‘international gender equality work’, drawing on international peacekeeping, as well as Sweden’s commitment to implementing UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women, peace, and security.\(^{63}\) The resolution, which had been adopted by the UN Security Council in 2000, addressed, amongst other things, the need for women as agents in peacekeeping and conflict resolution and underlined the ‘urgent need to mainstream a gender perspective into peacekeeping operations’.\(^{64}\) It furthermore stressed the importance of an increased share of women in international troops, especially in commanding positions.\(^{65}\)

This brought a new form of gender equality problem representation in the SAF, as the gender-complementarity ideas that had underpinned the 1990s KREOL merged with the gender mainstreaming of UNSCR 1325 and the SAF’s transition from national territorial
defence to international peacekeeping. The ‘problem’ to be solved by the SAF was inequality in an international arena, particularly women’s vulnerability in war and conflict, rather than gender inequalities within the SAF. Increasing the number of women in international peacekeeping was considered an integral part of the solution. As clearly shown in Alma Persson’s ethnographical study following a military unit preparing for international service in 2008, women were seen as key to some tasks, such as performing body searches on women or collaborating with local women in order to include a larger share of the population. During a search exercise, for example, soldiers were explicitly instructed to ‘use the woman soldier’ for these specific purposes.66

In essence, then, during the first decade of the twenty-first century, the gender complementarity discourse was reworked rather than replaced: men remained soldiers but women became women soldiers with a specific task essential to the success of the operation. Yet at the same time, women remained marginalised, as their contributions tended to be restricted to several very specific positions and tasks. For example, in the studied unit, it was considered important to place one woman in each search group in the platoon. This was because of the new practice that no woman should have to be body-searched by a man, as this could be considered offensive and violating local religious norms and customs. Thus the unit needed at least one woman soldier in order to be able to interrogate and perform body searches on women. Understanding gender equality as a question of assigning women specific tasks, as ‘women soldiers’, was not specific to the SAF. Several nations, for example the US during the war in Afghanistan, deployed so-called ‘female engagement teams’ in order to establish access to local women.67

Based on the ways in which UNSCR 1325 was interpreted and implemented in the SAF, a reworked gender-complementarity discourse produced new divisions of labour between women and men.68 But the implementation of the UN resolution also contributed to a change in the very aim of gender equality. Rather than targeting working conditions and gender discrimination ‘at home’, gender equality now became the problem ‘overseas’: the military had to work against gender inequalities in war and conflict zones around the world. This meant that while the issue of gender equality shifted geographically, it gained more ground within the SAF because of UNSCR 1325, as women’s contribution was so closely tied to the highly valued operative ability. Thus a paradox emerged at the turn of the millennium: on the one hand, gender equality became less about working conditions within the organisation but on the other, it ranked higher on the agenda because of its connection to increased efficiency in international missions.69

**Introducing gender-neutral conscription**

After nearly 50 years of debate, a gender-neutral form of conscription was adopted in Sweden in 2010. Considering the symbolic weight of such a reform, and given that Sweden was the second country in the world to introduce conscription for men and women on formally equal terms, it may appear surprising that the decision did not warrant much parliamentary or media attention. The main reason was that the gender neutrality of the reform was obscured, as this was part of a bill that deactivated conscription in times of peace, replacing the previous conscription system with a volunteer-based (gender-neutral) recruitment system. The conservative-liberal government’s proposal to
Deactivate conscription was based in part on a liberal critique of the coercion of citizens but also on the notion that conscription was no longer deemed necessary and was therefore not financially legitimate. However, by deactivating rather than abolishing conscription, the bill offered the possibility that a future government might reactivate conscription if deemed necessary.70

Deactivating conscription was controversial, and the bill was adopted by a parliamentary majority of only seven votes, with the main criticism being levelled against the deactivation.71 In this setting, the gender neutrality of conscription played a subordinate role and hence received comparatively little attention in the bill of 300-plus pages. It was first and foremost presented as a prerequisite for the military to recruit the best and most qualified, and in that context ‘the gender of the individual has no significance’.72 However, because male-only conscription had proved insufficient to recruit women service members, the SAF risked missing out on qualified female candidates. Therefore, the government concluded that any future recruitment system had to be the same for women as for men.73

In 2017, seven years after the introduction of gender-neutral conscription and the simultaneous deactivation of the conscription system, the matter once again appeared on the government’s agenda. Against the backdrop of perceived threats to national security, such as increased military activity in Sweden’s geopolitical area, and the inability to recruit enough service members on a voluntary basis, the new government (made up of a coalition of Social Democrats and the Green Party) decided to reactivate conscription.74 Because the 2010 bill enabled a future government to do this without involving the Swedish parliament in the decision, the conscription system could be deployed at short notice and with little further discussion. Hence, the reactivated gender-neutral conscription system was implemented already in 2018.

So, in 2018, half a century of public debate and policy proposals on women, men, and gender equality in the SAF came full circle. Beginning with the youth league of the People’s Party and their demand for gender-neutral conscription in 1965 and ending with the 2018 implementation of conscription for both women and men, the various proposals and implemented reforms challenged one of the most fundamental foundations of gender relations within a society by including women among those defined as the armed protector of the nation.

**Concluding discussion**

This article has shown how issues regarding women, men, and gender equality have been debated, made sense of, regulated, and dealt with in the context of military labour in Sweden for more than half a century. The analysis shows that women’s place in the military and their (potential) contributions to the organisation have been subjected to heated debate since the 1960s. The period studied begins and ends with discussions on gender-neutral military service, illustrating both continuity and change: continuity in the discussions on conscription of both women and men but change in the ways in which women and their (real and potential) contributions to the military were represented.

Since the 1960s, the official stance of the Swedish government and the SAF has undergone major shifts. In the beginning of the period studied, the recruitment of military personnel was based on conscription for men, while women were excluded from military
training and professions altogether. Since then, male military service has been replaced by a gender-neutral conscription system. Throughout these major transformations, military professions and military labour have, however, remained highly gendered terrain, dominated by men in both a symbolic and a numerical sense; soldiering has continued to be associated with men and male characteristics, and men constituted 85% of the selected conscripts and 93% of the professional military officers in 2018.\textsuperscript{75}

Our analysis shows that women (and, in some cases, men) have been perceived as both a problem and solution, albeit in different ways at different times. Unlike women, men have not been challenged as a group in terms of general suitability for military work. On the contrary, they were the norm against which women were measured. Men as a group were rarely perceived as a problem in the SAF, a notable exception being the negative attitudes espoused by male officers towards new female recruits. For the most part, men were considered a \textit{solution} rather than an obstacle, especially with regards to military staffing needs.

Women, on the other hand, were presented as a means to solve and deal with a range of challenges, from personnel shortages (freeing men for combat in the 1960s, as well as adding to the pool of potential conscripts in 2010), to the need for peace agents, safeguarding women’s needs in international missions. Furthermore, the inclusion of women in the armed forces was part of the larger project of mainstreaming gender in all areas of society, a prerequisite to maintaining the self- and international image of Sweden as a vanguard of gender equality.

Throughout the period in question, women’s presence and place in military work have continuously been challenged and contested through the use of a range of widely divergent problem representations. Even before the government announced that women should be given access to military officer positions, women’s military abilities and contributions were consistently called into question. Gender differences in competences, leadership styles, and physical abilities have been scrutinised endlessly. So has the notion of women contributing to the armed forces—as women. In the 1990s, when ideas of ‘creative differences’ were on the agenda, gender differences were framed as something positive, to be endorsed in order to maximise military efficiency. Gender equality, then, was simply a matter of acknowledging and affirming gender differences, and appreciating women’s military contributions as a valuable (complementary) addition to the work of men. When similar arguments reappeared at the turn of the millennium in the context of UNSCR 1325, women were imbued with an entirely different political significance through the demands of international service. This then reworked rather than replaced the idea of gender complementarity: women and men filled different functions in international operations less because of their alleged different nature than the gender norms and values in the war and conflict zones. Nonetheless, the conclusion was yet again that women soldiers were needed simply because they were women.

Gender-neutral conscription could be interpreted as a liberal feminist success story—finally eliminating one of the most fundamental differences between women and men’s obligations as citizens, in line with the arguments made by the People’s Party youth league in 1965. It could also be considered a major feminist setback, using gender equality to strengthen the legitimacy of the SAF, essentially ‘genderwashing’ it and further adding to the patriarchal militarisation of society. Yet another perspective on this ongoing
feminist debate about women in the military is that gender equality can never be fully achieved in military organisations due to their inherent masculine hegemony.76

From an international perspective, the Swedish case is somewhat of a paradox. On the one hand, Sweden has positioned itself as a pioneer in gender equality in the military. Sweden was one of the first countries to allow women to serve in all military branches and positions, including combat,77 and in the twenty-first century it has been a leading nation in the implementation of, and work related to, UNSCR 1325.78 On the other hand, the share of women officers in Sweden is low compared to the NATO countries.79 In addition, there are reports of serious gender-related work environment problems, such as sexual harassment and a lack of adequate equipment for women.80

What the new conscription system will mean for gender relations in the SAF and in broader public discourse is very much open to question. Will the new form of conscription become part of a shift in the gendered conceptualisation of citizenship in Sweden? Or will the more inclusive ideals of soldiering that have developed in the ‘New Armed Forces’, in which women are described as essential to operational efficiency in international missions, be replaced by more traditional ideals of ‘real soldiers’ in the return to a defence organisation that primarily serves to protect the nation’s borders? How the gender-neutral conscription system is implemented and framed in SAF practice as well as the ways in which it becomes a part of future problem representations (and solutions) requires further inquiry.

Notes

1. Swedish Armed Forces’ official Web site, ‘Militär grundutbildning med värnplikt’, https://jobb.forsvarsmakten.se/grundutbildning-plikt/ (accessed August 30, 2018).
2. This article discusses gender relations by focusing on women and men, although this is a simplification as not all employees in the SAF identify with either one of these two categories. For a discussion on non-binary and trans service members and the process of regulating the inclusion of LGBT people in the Swedish military, which is an interesting parallel to the present article, see Fia Sundevall and Alma Persson, ‘LGBT in the Military: Policy Development in Sweden 1944–2014’, Sexuality Research & Social Policy 13, no. 2 (2016): 119–29.
3. Contrary to common belief, Israel does not conscript women and men on equal terms. See e.g. Edna Lomsky-Feder and Orna Sasson-Levy, Women Soldiers and Citizenship in Israel: Gendered Encounters with the State (London: Routledge, 2018), 139. On the Norwegian case, see e.g. Dag Ellingsen and Ulla-Britt Lilleaas, Gender Equality in the Norwegian Armed Forces (Oslo: ABM-media, 2017).
4. Anna Maria Forssberg and Anna Fredholm, ‘Inledning’, in Lumpen: från mönstring till muck, eds. Anna Maria Forssberg and Klas Kronberg (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2014), 9. This and all quotes in Swedish that follow have been translated into English by the authors.
5. Ibid.; Lina Sturfelt, ‘The Constantly Conscripted Citizen – The Swedish Army Narrative of Conscription during the Early Cold War’, Militärhistorisk tidskrift 1 (2014). See also e.g. Lars Ericson, Medborgare i vapen: väpnplikten i Sverige under två sekel (Lund: Historiska media, 1999); Anna Leander, ‘Enduring Conscription: Vagueness and Vårnplikt in Sweden’, in The Changing Face of European Conscription, ed. Pertti Joenniemi (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); Pontus Rudberg, “Armen måste bli en skola för hela folket”: Krigsmaktens folkfostrande ambitioner och praktiker 1901–1950’, in Lumpen: från mönstring till muck, eds. Anna Maria Forssberg and Klas Kronberg (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2014); Fia Sundevall, ‘Military Education for Non-military Purposes: Economic and Social Governing Projects Targeting Conscripts in Early Twentieth-century Sweden’, History of Education Review 46, no. 1 (2017).
6. Sturfelt, ‘The Constantly Conscripted Citizen’, 40–1, 46; Rudberg, ‘Armen måste bli en skola för hela folket’. See also e.g. the work of political scientists Annica Kronsell and Erika Svedberg, ‘The Duty to Protect: Gender in the Swedish Practice of Conscription’, Cooperation and Conflict 36, no. 2 (2001) & ‘The Swedish Military Manpower Policies and their Gender Implications’, in The Changing Face of European Conscription, ed. Pertti Joenniemi (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

7. Christopher Jehn and Zachary Selden, ‘The End of Conscription in Europe?’, Contemporary Economic Policy 20, no. 2 (2002); Pertti Joenniemi, ed., The Changing Face of European Conscription (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

8. Helena Carreiras, Gender and the Military: Women in the Armed Forces of Western Democracies (London: Routledge, 2006); Ana Carden-Coyne, ed., Gender and Conflict since 1914: Historical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Cynthia Enloe, Globalization and Militarism: Feminists Make the Link (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); Joshua S. Goldstein, War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

9. See e.g. Ibid; Anders Ahlbäck and Fia Sundevall, ‘Introduction’, in Gender, War and Peace: Breaking up the Borderlines, eds. Ahlbäck and Sundevall (Joensuu: University Press of Eastern Finland, 2014); Aaron Belkin, Bring me Men: Military Masculinity and the Benign Facade of American Empire, 1898–2001 (London: Hurst, 2012); Karen Hagemann, Gisela Mettele, and Jane Rendall, eds., Gender, War and Politics: Transatlantic Perspectives, 1775–1830 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Andrew Orr, Women and the French Army During the World Wars, 1914–1940 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017); Linsey Robb and Juliette Pattinson, eds., Men, Masculinities and Male Culture in the Second World War (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

10. Goldstein, War and Gender, 10.

11. Carreiras, Gender and the Military, 41.

12. See e.g. Carreiras, Gender and the Military, 40–6; Paul R. Higate, ed., Military Masculinities. Identity and the State (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003). Orna Sasson-Levy, ‘The Military in a Globalized Environment: Perpetuating an “Extremely Gendered” Organization’, in Handbook of Gender, Work and Organization, eds. Emma L. Jeanes, David Knights, and Patricia Yancey Martin (Chichester: Wiley, 2011).

13. For similar argument, see Annica Kronsell and Erica Svedberg, ‘Emasculating the Duty to Defend? Gender Identities in the Swedish Military Organisations’, in Cost Action A10 - Reconstructing the Means of Violence: Defence Restructuring and Conversion, ed. Mark Elam (Luxembourg: Office of the Official Publications of the European Communities, 2002), 94.

14. Fia Sundevall, Det sista manliga yrkesmonopolet: Genus och militart arbete i Sverige 1865–1989 (Stockholm: Makadam, 2011).

15. Alma Persson, Changing Boundaries, Defending Boundaries: Gender Relations in the Swedish Armed Forces (Linköping: Linköping University Press, 2011).

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17. Ibid; Carol Lee Bacchi, Women, Policy and Politics: the Construction of Policy Problems (London: SAGE, 1999), 1–50; Analysing Policy: What’s the Problem Represented to Be? (Frenchs Forest, NSW: Pearson, 2009); Carol Bacchi and Joan Eveline, ‘Approaches to Gender Mainstreaming: What’s the Problem Represented to Be?’ in Mainstreaming Politics: Gendering Practices and Feminist Theory, eds. Carol Bacchi and Joan Eveline (Adelaide: South Australia University of Adelaide Press, 2010).

18. Sundevall, Det sista manliga yrkesmonopolet (2011), 50. See also Madeleine Lintendo, Uppbåd, uppgifter, undantag. Om genusarbetsdelning i Sverige under första världskriget (Stockholm: Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, 2005), 71–2, 173–4; Charlotte Tornbjer, Den nationella modern, Moderskap i konstruktioner av svensk nationell gemenskap under 1900-talets första hälft (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2002), 195–9.
19. ‘Kvinnlig värnplikt?’, *FPU-Bulletinen*, no. 16 (1965); *Han, hon & lumpen: ett värnpliktprogram från Folkpartiets ungdomsförbund* (Stockholm: FPU, 1967). See also letter from the People’s party's Youth League to the Minister of Defense, 13 March 1969, in Ministry of Defense, Konseljakt, 11 November 1969, no. 24, National Archives.

20. Letter from the SAF head office (Försvarsstaben), section IV, 16 May 1965, in YK 2950, vol. 1, Swedish National Archives. See also e.g. 'Kvinnlig värnplikt uddlös stridsfråga', *Expressen*, June 16 (1965), 2; 'Kvinnlig värnplikt', *Dagens Nyheter*, July 29 (1965), 2.

21. The civil-military personnel category was used between 1895 and 1983. It was abandoned partly as a consequence of adaptation to the Geneva Convention which did not give room for categories between civilians and combatants/military personnel. Government of Sweden, Bill 1982/83:143, 1–2, 15; Försvarrets personalutvecklingsutredning, *Civil personal i försvaret: uppgifter och kompetens i freds- och krigsorganisationen. SOU 1989:85* (Stockholm: Allmänna förl., 1989), 27–8.

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26. Anita Nyberg, ‘Gender Equality Policy in Sweden 1970–2010’, *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies* 2, no. 4 (2012): 67–84; Maria Stanfors, *Mellan arbete och familj – ett dilemma för kvinnor i 1900-talets Sverige* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2017).

27. Florin and Nilsson, ‘Something in the Nature of a Bloodless Revolution’, 49–54; Åsa Lundqvist, *Family Policy Paradoxes: Gender Equality and Labour Market Regulation in Sweden, 1930–2010* (Policy: Bristol, 2011), 80; Mary Ruggie, *The State and Working Women: A Comparative Study of Britain and Sweden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 28–38. Cf. Yvonne Hirdman, *Women - From Possibility to Problem?: Gender Conflict in the Welfare State: The Swedish Model* (Stockholm: Arbetslivscentrum, 1994), 29.

28. Letter from the Commander of the Air Force (CAF) to various military authorities, 5 December 1966, no. 301:11902, Försvarsstaben’s archives, centralexp., F1:95, Swedish Military Archives.

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32. *Swedish Code of Statutes*, SFS 1976:871.
33. Fia Sundevall, 'Kallt krig, het könsdebatt', in Kriget som aldrig kom: 12 forskare om kalla kriget, ed. Andreas Linderoth (Karlskrona: Marinmuseum, 2011).
34. Terms of reference for BKF in Kvinnan och försvarets yrken, 176.
35. Ibid., 189–200; Anthony King, 'Gender and Close Combat Roles', in The Palgrave International Handbook of Gender and the Military, eds. Rachel Woodward and Claire Dunkanson (London: Palgrave, 2017).
36. Promemoria titled 'Icke stridande befattning – vad är det?', by the BKF, 17 June 1975, in YK 3315, vol. 8; Kvinnan och försvarets yrken: betänkande. SOU 1977:26 (Stockholm: Liber, 1977), 64–7.
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38. Swedish Code of Statutes, SFS 1994:1810.
39. See e.g. Paul Cawkill, Alison Rogers, Sarah Knight, and Laura Spear, Women in Ground Close Combat Roles: The Experiences of other Nations and a Review of the Academic Literature (Porton Down, Salisbury: Defence Science and Technology Laboratory, 2009).
40. FOA-tidningen, no. 3 (1980), 4.
41. Ibid., 4–7, 8–10, 17–19, 22–4.
42. 'Kvinnor i försvaret: Debatten 1975-02-27', Lottanytt, no. 2 (1975): 12. See also Kronsell and Svedberg, 'Emasculating the Duty to Defend?' 95.
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44. Submitted opinions of the Supreme Commander, 1988, cited in Government Bill 1988/89, 9. See also Parliament minutes, no 115, April 14 (1986), 77. Anne Nilsson, Kvinnan som officer (Stockholm: Centralförb. Folk och försvar, 1990), 5.
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48. Susanna Adner, 'Brevet från Susanna – furir i kustartilleriet', Lottanytt, no. 4 (1984): 5.
49. Supreme Commander’s report to the Government, 18 January 1988, p. 5, in Regeringsakt, Ministry of Defense, 17 November 1988, Swedish National Archives. See also Nilsson, Kvinnan som officer, 21–3; Kronsell and Svedberg, 'The Duty to Protect', 169.
50. Lena Pettersson, Alma Persson, and Anders W. Berggren, ‘Changing Gender Relations: Women Officers’ Experiences in the Swedish Armed Forces’, Economic and Industrial Democracy 29, no. 2 (2008): 203.
51. Ibid., 202. For research on largely opposite experiences, and a discussion on why the results differ in this case, see Anna Fredholm, 'I männens värld: kvinnors berättelser om värnplikt, kroppar och utanförskap', in Sömmerskor, tornsvalor och sothöns: kvinnors försvarsarbete i Sverige sedan första världskriget, ed. Klas Kronberg (Stockholm: Armémuseum, 2016).
52. Supreme Commander’s report, 1988; Swedish Government, Bill 1988/89:52, 7–9.
53. Pettersson et al., ‘Changing Gender Relations’ (2008), 207–11. See also Nilsson, Kvinnan som officer, 23.
54. Letter from 'Kvinnliga officerare vid Lv 6’, 1992, printed as a facsimile in Louise Weibull, ’Tjejmönstring’: lyckad rekrytering eller lockad rekryt?: en studie av en ny rekryteringsdrive inom Försvarsmakten (Stockholm: Försvarshögskolan, 2001), 67.
55. Written communication from the Government, 1997/98:4, 20, & 1999/2000:24, 86.
56. Pettersson et al., ‘Changing Gender Relations’ (2008), 205.
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59. John Gray, *Män är från Mars, kvinnor är från Venus*, 1st ed. (Stockholm: Bromberg, 1992).

60. For similar discussion, see Berggren, *Undercover Operations in No-women’s Land*, 127–9; Annika Kronsell and Erika Svedberg, ‘The Swedish Military Manpower Policies and their Gender Implications’, 158–9.

61. During the course of the project, the focus of KREOL was gradually shifted from issues of men and women to other forms of difference, such as ethnic diversity or differences between civilian and military staff member. When KREOL was evaluated in 1999, it had largely transformed into a project about diversity in terms of ethnicity. Berggren, *Undercover Operations in No-women’s Land* (2007), 130–5.

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65. Ibid.

66. Alma Persson, “Framåt gubbar!” Genus och militär praktik i ett internationellt insatsförband*, Tidskrift för genusvetenskap, no. 1–2 (2010): 158.

67. Annika Bergman Rosamond and Annica Kronsell, ‘Cosmopolitan Militaries and Dialogic Peacekeeping: Danish and Swedish Women Soldiers in Afghanistan’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 20, no. 2 (2018): 172–87, Synne L. Dyvik, ‘Performing Gender in the “Theatre of War”: Embodying the Invasion, Counterinsurgency and Exit Strategy in Afghanistan’ (Dissertation, University of Sussex, 2013), 133–40.

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75. For SAF personnel statistics, see SAF Annual Report 2018, appendix 1, p. 10, 21.

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77. Sundevall, Det sista manliga yrkesmonopolet, 163–4.

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Acknowledgments

The authors are very grateful to the close reading by, and insightful feedback from, Anders Ahlbäck on an earlier version of this manuscript. We would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers and deputy editor for helpful comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council under [grant number 2017-01066], and NordForsk under [grant number 88041].

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