

# GENDER ISSUES IN THE DANISH DEFENCE<sup>1</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> This case was written for Copenhagen Business School. It is based on quantitative and qualitative research on the issue. However, to ensure anonymity of the study participants, some parts have been adapted. The case is intended to be used as the basis for discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of situations of gender issues. No part of this case may be copied, stored, transmitted, reproduced, or distributed in any form or medium whatsoever without the permission of the authors.

The Danish Defence is not just any other workplace. While the average workday for many employees in the Danish Defence might be similar to those of many others Danes, this organization has a particular purpose as its existence and agenda is based on an ambition to protect Danish citizens and “assert Denmark's sovereignty” (see Appendix 1). Thus, the efforts of this organization and its employees are arguably motivated by the claim that “something is worth fighting for,” as it is the slogan of the Danish Defence. Emphasizing the implied seriousness of this work, it has been argued that “militaries, armies and those in them are organized and act are literally matters of life and death” (Hearn 2011: 37). The Danish Defence is also somewhat unique as it has been one of the last male-only workplaces in the Danish labor market. This case invites practitioners, scholars, and students to engage with the question of how to obtain greater gender equality within the Danish Defence.

## **THE CURRENT SITUATION IN THE DENISH DEFENCE**

As most other Western state militaries, the Danish Defence relies on so-called ‘professional soldiers’, who sign contracts with the military after completing training programs within the Danish Defence. The Danish Defence does however have a long history of military service, filling the ranks through the drafting of male citizens. This 170-year old conscription system is still in effect, albeit in practice almost on stand-by as 99 percent of the 4,200 enlisted soldiers completing military service each year now voluntarily sign a contract to serve. These soldiers serve between four and twelve months in the Army, Navy, Air Force or Danish Emergency Management Agency. Relevant to this specific case, the conscription system is gendered as only male citizens can be drafted, whereas women have the option to serve on almost equal terms alongside the men.

The shift from a drafted to an enlisted military personnel system has entailed an increased need for active recruitment and retention efforts since the Danish Defence now competes with other professions and organizations to attract trainees and employees. This is evident in a continued effort to attract young Danes to the military profession through an extensive amount of advertisements in public media platforms.

Another area that has seen change is the matter of admission requirements and physical requirements that employees must meet as these have continuously been altered. After having had both age and gender-specific requirements as to how many kilometers employees must be able to run or how many pull-ups they should be able to do, the Danish Defence now has requirements related to the specific function an employee fills. Thus, the physical requirements for a combat soldier and a pilot are differentiated to accommodate the specific tasks they are expected to do; a premise that now overrules previous considerations of how gender or age might affect one’s capabilities.

When it comes to the development of policy, the Danish Defence set a high standard among the NATO member states in 2011 with the coining of an ambitious diversity policy. Here, the importance of recruiting and retaining women as well as citizens with an ethnic minority background was determined and set as an important strategic goal (Danish Defence diversity policy, 2011). The effect of this policy has, however, not been too impressive as the following section will illustrate in facts and figures.

### **Gender in facts and figures**

Aside from a gender-specific conscription system, men and women have had equal rights and access to all positions and functions in the Danish Defence since 1992. The ban on women's participation in combat was for instance lifted in 1988 after a period of trial programs with women in combat units (Sløk-Andersen 2014).

But while the percentage of women in the ranks has slowly increased since they first gained access to low-ranking positions in the 1960's, a formalized equal access regardless of gender has not meant an equal presence of men and women in the ranks in Denmark. As such, women currently fill 7.6 percent of military positions across the Danish Defence, a percentage that has increased from 5.2 percent a decade ago. The share of women among Danish troops deployed in international missions has been increased at a somewhat similar pace. With the current level of 7.6 percent women, Denmark is below the NATO member state average of 10.8 percent. Among the conscripted soldiers, however, the gender ratio has increased over the last 15 years. At this entry-level, the percentage of women has gone from 2.4 to a current level of 17 percent (see Figure 2), making women less of a rare sight in the Danish military today. This increase in women among the conscripted soldiers could be seen as one of the greatest potentials for increasing the overall percentage of women in the organization. When considering the overall percentage of women employed in the Danish Defence, women in fact make up 16.1 percent given that a greater percentage work in civilian positions (e.g. carrying out tasks related to HR and finances) than military positions (e.g. carrying out tasks related to military operations).

Based on a 2003 questionnaire, the survey showed that experiences of harassment based on gender were far more widespread among those women employed in military positions than those employed in civilian positions (Øhrstrøm et al. 2003). Following the startling conclusion that one in every three women in military positions had experienced this type of unwanted attention from colleagues, efforts were made to address and counter harassment among employees in the Danish Defence. A similar survey has not been conducted since 2003, making it difficult to assess the current situation.

### **Recent efforts to recruit more women**

Since the formulation of the organization's first diversity policy in 1993, various strategic efforts have been implemented in order to increase the percentage of women in the Danish Defence. Considerable efforts have, for example, been put into conducting thorough qualitative and quantitative surveys among prospective and current employees and the design of a series of new types of campaigns to attract more women translated into award-winning advertisements.

Specific to the conscription system, various new initiatives have been launched in order to attract more women to sign up. As of 2006, women have been invited to take part in the so-called 'Defence Day' where citizens receive information about the Danish Defence and are examined to determine whether they are eligible to serve (most Danes will know this as *session*). While men are obliged to participate in this event on a specific day during the year they turn 18, inviting the female part of the population is a somewhat new initiative. This has been done as a recruitment effort, underscoring that women are indeed welcome in the ranks.

A system for 'particularly motivated' conscripts was introduced in 2012, enabling three specific groups of citizens to bypass any potential delay on serving since there is often a long wait to serve as many conscripts sign contracts well in advance. This system fast-tracks access to military basic training for 1) women 2) physically fit men and 3) citizens who have already applied for advanced military training

programs. While the wait means that the average citizen volunteering may need to wait for a slot to be open sometime in the future, this system ensures that these three groups of ‘particularly motivated’ citizens can serve right away. Rather than waiting and having time to potentially reconsider the decision to enlist, the women who volunteer to serve are guaranteed to be part of the first possible intake; a practicality that appears to have effectively increased the percentage of women doing military service.

The Danish Defence’s six recruitment centers also hold information events targeted women. Here, prospective soldiers can meet female soldiers who tell about their own experiences, try on the uniform and get an overall glimpse of the military profession. Further, efforts have been made to make information available to women who consider a military career, e.g. through websites, web campaigns and pamphlets. And finally, the recent introduction of gender-mixed dorm rooms across Danish military camps, opposed to the gender separate accommodation that was standard before 2015, has been praised as an effective way to break down barriers between men and women in the Danish Defence (Ellingsen et al. 2016).

All of these initiatives are connected to an overall effort to increase diversity and equality within the Danish Defence, efforts that are also reflected in action plans for an increased diversity and commitment to The Danish Charter for Diversity as well as the Danish Charter for More Women in Leadership. Recognizing the importance of the organization’s efforts, the Danish Defence was awarded ‘Mia Prisen’ in 2011, an award given to organizations actively working towards greater equality and diversity in the workplace. However, policies and strategic efforts do not ensure results – as will be illuminated through the following presentation of lived experiences within the Danish Defence.

## **EXPERIENCES IN THE DANISH DEFENCE**

In the following, readers will be presented with four different stories from within the Danish Defence. These stories represent different perspectives on how gender issues unfold and affect people working within this organization. The four stories are based on observations and qualitative interviews conducted by one of the authors of this case in the period 2013 to 2017 as well as stories told in the media during this period. To ensure anonymity of the informants who have shared their stories, fragments of the different individual experiences have been merged and condensed to create new storylines.

### **Story 1: Women in leadership – and in their 20’s**

Frederiksen has been looking forward to her time in the army. Inspired by her two older brothers who have told her stories of comradery, exhaustion, and fun from their own experiences in the army, she signed up voluntarily to do military service. With a high school diploma, 20-year old Frederiksen looks forward to being more physically active and in a more male-dominated environment, away from the gossiping girls she went to high school with. From her long-time involvement as a semi-professional volleyball player, she is in great shape and used to getting dirty and bruised. From what her brothers have told her, the army should be the perfect place for her to start her career.

After the first two months of basic training, the sergeants announce that they want to appoint a second-in-command for each of the units in her platoon. Among the recruits, these individuals are appointed for their top performance and high potential in the army. To Frederiksen’s surprise, she is one of the recruits

who are appointed. She gets this message as she and three male recruits are pulled aside one Monday morning by their platoon commander, Lieutenant Olsen. As second-in-command, Frederiksen and the others are supposed to fill in for the sergeants whenever they are not there and ensure that the rest of the recruits in their units are always prepared and perform their roles as ordered. For instance, when venturing out on a drill, it is the role of the second-in-command to guarantee that all the other recruits have a filled water bottle, everyone brings their weapon, etc. To Frederiksen, it seems daunting, but she is up for the job. If her superiors believe in her, she needs to prove them right.

A month into her new role, however, Frederiksen begins to see a pattern. As she constantly struggles to persuade some of the guys in her unit obey her commands, she gets more and more frustrated. At one point, she overhears one of them saying, “she is not going to boss me around – she was only appointed because she is a woman.” Frederiksen starts to wonder if being a young woman might be the cause of her issues with her unit. After all, none of the other second-in-commands seem to be faced with this challenge. Talking to one of her good friends in another unit, she is hesitant to suggest gender as the core of the issue here.

After all, Frederiksen is the only woman who has achieved this responsibility in the entire company, and therefore, she has no one to compare to in this specific matter. However, as she observes the only female sergeant in the company, her suspicion is strengthened; the female sergeant is sometimes just overlooked and not listened to. For instance, she is made fun of behind her back and a group of the male recruits sometimes discuss whether they want to hook up with her or not over lunch. Frederiksen cannot make any conclusions, but it seems gaining respect as a woman in authority is much more difficult compared to men.

As the group of guys in her unit continue to ignore her orders, Frederiksen is unsure how to handle the situation. So far, she has ignored their stupid comments and tried her best to make herself heard. It is the sergeants, after all, who have decided that she should be second-in-command, and they are expecting her to live up to this responsibility. She cannot just give up and tell the sergeants that she could not make the others do what they were supposed to do – this would be the ultimate failure. As a result, she continues to do her best to keep the unit in order and instruct the other recruits to follow her commands – even if it means raising her voice, repeating herself again and again, and taking a fair share of rude comments from some of them.

Frederiksen hopes to create a career in the army and the feedback she receives from the sergeants indicates that she is indeed doing well. However, if she needs to constantly fight to make herself heard, is it worth the effort to stay in the army in the future? Is this just a specific group of guys who are annoying to work with? Will it get better as she moves to a different part of the army? Frederiksen realizes that most of the recruits she is surrounded by are still quite young. She figures that it is normal for 19 and 20 year-old men to fool around and not pay attention to women. The individuals who may potentially be her colleagues in the future will probably grow out of these behaviors and start taking her serious. Perhaps Frederiksen will start to gain their respect once the training becomes ‘for real’ and the chance of being deployed moves closer. Yet, as she recalls that the female sergeant still struggles to be heard, perhaps time will not solve the problem after all.

Frederiksen cannot figure out what to do. Should she just ‘suck it up’ and hope that this lack of respect will disappear as she advances? Is she even allowed to complain? After all, it was her own wish to be in a male-dominated environment, so she cannot really complain – can she? Should she talk to one of the sergeants or Lieutenant Olsen about it? But then again, what would she say? It is not like the other

recruits have harassed or abused her – they are just unwilling to do what she says. And perhaps it is because they think she is bad at her job? Maybe she is?

## **Story 2: The need for women in the special operation forces**

After a career in one of the Danish special operation forces (SOF), Rasmussen is now working at a strategic level focused on the improvement and development of these ‘elite’ units carrying out covert operations inside and outside Denmark. From his perspective, these specific units should be utilized even more than they are today, but recruiting enough qualified soldiers for these forces is a challenge. Moreover, since years of experience have taught him that these units *need* women, Rasmussen has started to consider that there needs to be more emphasis on attracting and recruiting women. For instance, a woman, who will typically has a smaller body than Rasmussen and his male colleagues, can infiltrate some environments much easier than a group of muscular men; something that is essential to how SOF soldiers work. So far, these units have not seen a single woman in their ranks since very few women apply and no woman has completed the admission tests yet.

However, many of Rasmussen’s colleagues do not understand why it is relevant to even discuss whether they should target women more explicitly. As many of them have suggested, women have the exact same opportunities of applying to the special operation forces. Rather than a matter of opportunity, they feel that women are not interested or good enough to complete these admissions tests. Rasmussen also believes that his colleagues will not accept if the high physical requirements are lowered to ensure that more women will pass the tests. If someone is hurt, you need to be able to trust that the person next to you is able to carry you to safety; with lowered physical requirements for women, this will no longer be guaranteed. According to Rasmussen’s SOF buddies, if women cannot make the cut, that is just too bad. The safety of everyone else comes first – no political agenda about gender equality should change that.

Rasmussen understands the reluctance of his fellow colleagues to adjust the requirements. When he got accepted himself, he had felt the same way. After having worked extremely hard to make it through himself – working out daily and adapting every aspect in his life to achieve this goal of becoming a SOF soldier – there was no way he would have accepted lowering the admission requirement for some individuals. If he had had to work that hard, everyone else should do the same. But now, 15 years later, he has come to the conclusion that if the Danish Defence is going to recruit women for the SOF units, which is essential for their future, they will have to think outside of the box. Regardless of sex, SOF soldiers cannot use average soldiers; they demand the best; the exceptional ones. From his point of view, women possess all the same skills required of SOF soldiers as men do: creative thinking, an understanding of politics and diplomacy, endurance, patience, collaboration, self-sufficiency, etc. Physical strength is the only reason why women are not already admitted.

Inspired by recent experiments in Norway, Rasmussen has started to explore the possibility of establishing a women-only SOF unit for which admission tests can be altered. Confirming Rasmussen’s assumption, the Norwegian experiments have shown that women can indeed complete training as SOF soldiers if admission and training is carried out with attention to women’s specific strengths and without the interference of men. Following the Norwegian special operation forces’ positive results of attracting and training women who had never considered applying to this part of the military, this could be the solution in Denmark, too. While Rasmussen thinks this is the best solution to the current recruitment challenges, how would this unfold in Denmark? Could it have potential for a similar success in Denmark if the Ministry of Defence of the Defence Command launches such an initiative?

### **Story 3: When the laughter stops**

Bolt loved being part of the Danish Defence. Straight after doing military service, she decided to do further training and become a professional soldier, which included a deployment to Iraq. She appreciated the versatility in her daily tasks at the military camp. She loved that each day was almost always different from the next. With the constant focus on professional development, Bolt found the continuous feedback on her performance extremely motivating. On top of that, the humorous and informal tone among her and the other soldiers in her unit made it fun to go to work. Actually, she considered it to be more 'just work'. After spending endless hours with the same group of soldiers, she considered the rest of the unit as her brothers rather than colleagues. They were used to helping each other out and they had grown to depend on each other. But while they were deployed, Bolt's relationship to her male colleagues changed.

As a recruit, Bolt had been used to taking her share of rude comments and jokes, but she had laughed it off and was used to giving rude comments right back. That often shut them up. But some of the other female recruits had been less comfortable with the jargon. After a few of the women soldiers had been 'surprised' in the showers and received obscene comments from male recruits, they reported it to the sergeants. Back then, Bolt had been quite convinced that the male soldiers intended it as a fun prank, but the women were disturbed by the event. Following the incident, the women who had reported their male peers were met with hostility and rumors appeared as to why these "back-stabbing women" would report their friends. Bolt had tried to keep out of the whole thing. She had always made sure to determine where her boundaries were when interacting with male soldiers and was convinced that this was why sexualized jokes and comments disappeared over time. During their year of training prior to deployment, they had become more like siblings and less like men and women in uniforms.

In Iraq, however, her gender became more visible once again. The male soldiers from other countries and local Iraqi men reacted very differently to her than her male colleagues, often making sexual offers and turning conversations about work-related issues into conversations about her private life. Given that women were warned not to walk around in military camp alone, she was always in the company of at least one colleague. It bothered her that she needed this precaution but with all the unwanted attention she felt that it was necessary so she better stick to this rule. Bolt could not help feeling that her gender had become more visible, so she tried to cover up the best she could. She never exercised in broad daylight, she cut her hair as short as possible, and in general, tried to avoid unveiling that she was a woman – because, after all, why should it matter here when it had not mattered back home?

The guys in her unit were kind enough to look after her and escort her around the camp – just like siblings would look after each other. The rest of the unit were the rock she could lean on; they all trusted each other with their lives. Finding herself in a somewhat uncertain position in the camp, she was even more thankful to have the rest of the unit around her. But then something happened. She was on her way into one of the men's quarters to return a movie she had borrowed, as she overheard three of the guys talking about her. And what she heard was nasty. They were engaged in an extremely explicit conversation about what sexual favors they wanted from her, talking about the most intimate parts of her body and what they wanted to do with them. She was shocked. She felt violated and did not know what to do. Should she cut in and make them aware that she was listening to what they were saying? Or should she just glide away silently? She was deeply dependent on these guys to even move around the camp and was already struggling with plenty of other men she came across at a daily basis. Was this just some sort of a joke – a humorous conversation that was meant to do no harm? Or was it something

that should make her more alert, indicating potential danger? As part of the same unit, they were all dependent on each other for keeping safe, but how could she trust them with her life now?

## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix 1: Mission statement**

The mission of the Armed Forces is:

- to prevent conflicts and war;
- to assert Denmark's sovereignty and to ensure its continued existence and integrity;
- and to promote a peaceful development in the world, with respect for human rights.

The tasks of the Armed Forces range from: Participation in international operations all over the world, to survey and protect Danish territory and territorial Waters, and to support the society with a number of vital tasks. These include surveillance of Denmark's air space and territorial waters, environmental surveillance, Pollution Prevention, fisheries inspection, Search & Rescue operations, Support to the Police Authorities and to the Emergency Management Agency.

Our Core Values are: Credibility, Transparency, Trust, Independence and Responsibility.

### **Appendix 2: Vision Statement**

The vision of the Defence.

- We must excel in what we do.
- The Armed Forces must serve Denmark as an appropriate and flexible military resource.
- The Armed Forces must be a sought-after partner for strategic alliance and coalition partners.
- The Armed Forces must be a visible and integral part of Denmark's total defence.

The organisation:

- Decisions to deploy resources must be made prudently and serve the overall interests of Denmark.
- Must be an open, innovative and dynamic organisation.
- Must go foremost in developing the public sector.
- Must be an attractive workplace, able to attract, inspire, challenge and develop talented employees.
- Accept its obligations as a workplace with a social responsibility for looking after its employees.



The workforce:

- Employees must demonstrate initiative and responsibility, and generally act within the collective framework of the organisation.
- Those entrusted with leadership responsibilities must demonstrate appropriate courage, be prepared to pioneer change, communicate clearly and create solutions.

### Appendix 3: Organizational structure

# DEFENCE COMMAND DENMARK

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