



MILITARY CULTURE AND GENDER

September 15 - 16, 2005

THE BALDY
CENTER
FOR LAW & SOCIAL POLICY

The Participation of Women in Western Armed Forces: Between a Gender and Politic Dimension

Katia Sorin

2, rue du docteur Charles Nicolle. Apt. 599

60200 Compiègne France

Tel. : 33 (0)3 44 41 66 59

Email : katia.sorin@laposte.net

From a documentary research, this article outlines the differences of the women's participation in some western armed forces (including Canada, France, Germany, Netherlands, Spain and United Kingdom) throughout a sociological and political viewpoint. This article originates from a research conducted within the laboratory Georges Friedmann with a financial support of the *Centre d'études en sciences sociales de la Défense*. The team was constituted by Jolanda Bosch and René Moelker (Netherlands), Gerhard Kümmel (Germany), Brigitte Frotiée, Vincent Porteret and Katia Sorin (France). This research, *Des femmes militaires en Occident, quelles leçons pour la France ?*, was published at *Les Documents du C2SD* in 2005.

Research context

Until the end of the 1990s, the integration of women in the armed forces was not an interesting subject for the French researchers, both civilian and military, as the military question in general. With the end of the conscription and the increase of recruits this situation has been changed. The studies about women in the military have been multiplied. The French military started to recruit more and more women. In this context some studies were conducted in order to better understand this population. Now, the question is whether the French situation is specific or not in comparison to other countries.

Also, this research aims at understanding the historical, social and political differences about women's participation in the armed forces of six countries : Canada, France, Germany, Netherlands, Spain and United Kingdom.

The starting point is the link between armed forces and society. The explanations of the similarities and the differences between countries are considered, for the most part, as external to the military institution. In this context, the position of women in the society, the impact of European legal decisions for concerned countries, the national policies about equality between sexes are tackled. Of course, this viewpoint does not reject the internal factors. The specificities of the armed forces inside the society should permit to better understand the link between these specificities and the position of women in the armed forces.

In this context, the choice of the countries was decisive. Firstly, five European countries (France, Germany, Spain, Netherlands and United Kingdom), that have their own organisational specificities and a different history about women integration, old and recent. Secondly, a non-European country (Canada) that permits to strengthen the question of the link between external and internal influences especially without the European policies side. Also, Canada is interesting for European countries because women are integrated in the combat arms since almost 15 years.

Methodology

This research is mostly a documentary research, through documents from academic and military works, legal texts and official statistics.

Women in military, research context assessment

	Germany	Canada	Spain	France	Netherlands	UK
Who	Defence scientist	Officers	Defence/civilian	Officers/civilians	Defense scientist / civilian	Defence / civilian
Academic Students	Few	Few	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Men / Women	Both	More women	Both	Both	More women	Both
Organizations	No	Comité consultative ministériel sur l'intégration des genres dans les forces canadiennes. Organisation consultative des femmes de la Défense	Instituto de la mujer Comite de la mujer	Comité d'observation sur l'intégration des femmes en service	Defense Women's Network	Tri Service Equal opportunities Center
Topics	. Masculinity .Debate analysis .Law .Cadets .Women in military advertisement .Opinion .Socialization	.1980' experiment .Combat arms .Early departure .Equality policies .Submarines .Leadership .Diversity	.Law .International comparisons .Pragmatic questions	.Demography . Motivation .Identity .Integration .career .Link between private and work life	.External missions .History .Missions change .Management .Diversity	.Combat arms .Forces and society relationship .Discrimination .Diversity

Globally, the first and common remark is that military women are quite invisible among academic works, even among feminist works. As for France, the question of women in the armed forces does not really interest researchers outside the military institution. The researches are mostly conducted by military researchers and defence scientists or by researchers financed by the armed forces for a study in particular. Also, the differences between civilian and military researches are first of all the viewpoints. On the one hand, the studies are based on a more concrete viewpoints with recommendations or advices (from inside), on the other hand, the studies are based on a more theoretical viewpoint with general conclusion (from outside). It could be analyse as action versus debate. In any case, it's this difference that explain, for the most part, the differences of literature between countries, especially between countries where almost all the studies are conducted inside the institution by military or ex-military and countries where the studies are conducted by both civilian and military researches. For example, in Canada works are mainly carried out by officers who have a master or a doctorate, in psychology. As for Germany, the Sozialwissenschaftliches Institute Der Bundeswehr (SOWI) publish the majority of the researches on this subject. In United Kingdom and Netherlands a certain number of studies are conducted by researchers with a civil status. Spain approaches are in a mixed model. In other respects, the viewpoint seems to differ according to the researchers gender. Men seem to tackle this subject more from an institutional and theoretical point of view when women seem to tackle this subject more from a gender and empirical point of view. But this idea has to be more detailed because the reality is more complex and is not so stereotyped as the spanish case show where the legal analyses are as well treated by men as by women. Indeed, it would be necessary to push the analysis further by taking into account

various dimensions about the concerned social sciences disciplines¹ with the question of women in the armed forces. And the observed differences could be also confronted with the positions of each within the institutional or academic research world. Also, the viewpoints are different because the reality of the participation of women in the armed forces and the influences of the external decisions are different.

Women in combat arms

The example of women in combat arms is convincing. Among our six countries, it seems that only United Kingdom and Canada did some studies about the integration of women in the combat arms, with United Kingdom that does not recruit women in combat arms when Canada recruits women in combat arms since the beginning of the 1990'. We will take the example of infantry.

The British army is opposed to recruit women in infantry. A study was published in 2002 by the British army around this question.² One of the demonstration was to point out that the fact that only a small number of women had successfully passed the physical test does not force the institution to open the combat arms to women. Why open if only a few are interested ? However, they pointed out that the presence of women does not have a negative impact on the efficiency and cohesion of a unit. The more important variable is the leadership. But because it's difficult to measure the cohesion, it's not possible to have a definitive conclusion on this topic. Not any experience is possible.

As for Canada, it's after a decision of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal that the army was forced to recruit women in combat arms. Before the end of the 1990' a study³ was conducted in order to evaluate the situation after less than one decade, and showed the difficulties that was met by women. What is interesting here, in comparison to United kingdom, is that the Canadian army has to be, at least officially, successful, has to recruit women, has to keep them. So the study shows the difficulties that women met in terms of social integration, physical standards, etc., and point out that the problem is the military culture and the attitudes of leaders. This study give some recommendations in order to try to change the situation. So here the difficulties are not a pretext to say that women do not have their place in the armed forces, in infantry for example. As they have to have women in combat arms, the difficulties are a pretext to give some advices for making improvements. We have to integrate women, what can we do for that ?

Finally, the big difference between United Kingdom and Canada is that the British forces do not have the same level of constraints towards the civilian power as Canadian forces have. This example point out that the question of women in military is reflected in the question of the link between the power of the military institution inside the society, strong in United Kingdom and weak in Canada. We will go back to it further.

Women's situation in the armed forces

In all concerned countries women are in the armed forces at least since the end of the nineteenth century. They took part in the different wars, even if their occupation remained mainly subordinates and civilian (medical and social services, administration). The decade seventy seems revolving for the process of integration of women in the Western forces armed, which confirms the influence of the international standards. During the beginning of the Eighties the officers schools were open to women. With the end of the Nineties, the differences in restrictions between the countries became blurred but for different reasons.

Nowadays, the process of integration of women in the Western armed forces continues. It is noted that, in the countries that were the last to open their doors to women the percentage of military women increase very fast. It is the case of Germany and Spain. In Germany the number of women military has increased a lot since only four years, from 5 000 to 10 000 with an official goal of 15 000 women, meaning that German armed forces try to be at the same level than the average of Nato countries. Since the end of conscription, the development of new contracts (for officers as for 'volunteers'), and the end of the quotas, French military has recruited a lot of women. As for Canada, Netherlands and United Kingdom the data are relatively stable. These countries did not meet upheavals since more than one decade, except for Canada in 1989 with the possibility for women to serve in the combat arms, situation that concerns in fact only few women.

¹ Political sciences, sociology of the right, demography, military sociology, sociology of the organizations, etc.

² Ministry of Defence, Women in the armed forces, full report, may 2002.

³ DAVIS K., *Etude du Chef d'état-major de l'Armée de terre sur l'intégration des genres : l'expérience des femmes qui ont servi dans les armes de combat*, rapport, Ottawa, Défense nationale, 1998.

Women in combat arms

	Germany	Canada	Spain	France	Netherlands	UK
Women in infantry	Yes	Yes	Yes	<i>Not clear</i>	Yes	No
Women in submarines	<i>Not clear</i>	Yes	<i>Not clear</i>	No	No	No

Some countries have still restrictions towards women as for Netherlands, United Kingdom, and France. Netherlands does not yet authorize women to serve in the Marines and submarines when United Kingdom does not permit women to serve in the combat arms and submarines. There is also some restrictions in France for submarines and *gendarmérie mobile*. In terms of percentage, we have, on one hand, Canada, Spain and also France that have more than 10 % of women, and on another side Germany, Netherlands and United Kingdom that have less than 10 %, especially Germany with 5,5 %.

Position of women soldiers in the different countries (between 2002 to 2004)

	Germany	Canada	Spain	France	Netherlands	UK
% of military women	5,5	12,5	10,5	12,5	8,5	9
% of women officers		14,5	2*	8	7	10
% of women non-officers⁴		12,0	16	13	9	8,5
% of women in Army	6,6	10,5	10	9,5	8	7,5
% of women in Air force	5,0	17	11	18	9	11
% of women in Navy	8,0	12	10	12	9,5	9
% of women recruits		20		24	11	11,0
Objective (%)	7 à 10	20		No	12	
Recruit Objective (%)		28		No	13	

* This data includes officers and non-commissioned officers. In fact women represent 1% of officers and 3 % of non-commissioned officers.

Beyond general rate between armed forces, we observe also some differences through the internal distributions.

- Canada and United Kingdom are the countries in which the proportion of women officers is higher than the proportion of women non-officers.

- For Netherlands, Germany and, to a lesser extent, Spain, the percentage of women in Air Force, Army and Navy are quite the same. Whereas in Canada and France, the percentage of women is much higher in the Air Force. This comparison explains, for a big part, why it is in Canada and France that we find the higher percentages of women in the armed forces.

- Thus, Canada and France are the two countries that annually recruits the most women, that is to say more than 20 % of the new recruits each year.

Beyond the statistic comparison, the question of the relationship between the legislative devices and policies and their effective applications is more important to better understand the place of women in the military. Because if all the countries put some public policies in place, action plans to fight against the abusive discriminations and concret application

⁴ Non commissioned officers and enlisted.

vary from a country to another. Some of them, as for Netherlands and Canada appear enough active whereas others, as for United Kingdom and France, are more withdrawal.

All in all, it comes out from this comparative investigation that the integration of women in the armed forces was done⁵, initially under civil legal influence, in relation to the political, social and philosophical idea of an equality between the individuals. Of course the manner, the approach, the answer times, the actions and the prospects differ from a country to another. So, each country integrates differently the supranational standards in its legislative and national conventional device already existing. The professional equality remains a field where each one works out its own method and seeks to improve it and to eliminate the inequalities between men and women in the access and the preservation of employment. This social question of equality concerning the individuals whatever their differences (gender, age, marital status, sexual orientation, etc.), has largely influenced the armed forces. However, this social pressure does not explain all. It can also be for the armed forces a simple effect of advertisement and a fundamental equality principle to fulfil a legitimate function for the military institution itself.

The six studied countries are confronted with common stakes but the political answers and the methods of the specific devices are diversified in each country. Of course the factors of order historical or of the economic situation that contribute to explain the diversity of the situations are not minimize. However, we can stress that the evolution of the integration of women in the armed forces at the end of 1970' and at the whole beginning of the years 1980 is concomitant with the development of the supranational policies (as well of Europe as of UNO or NATO), in favour of the non-discrimination and the equal opportunity between men and women on the labour market.

Question of diversity

This question of equality between individuals has largely gone through all military institutions. In this matter the question of representativeness reflect this penetration, especially for countries that developed an official speech, policy and action about diversity.

The question of the influence of diversity in general, and the presence of women in particular, is more or less approached according to considered countries. The question of military women is, for example, in Canada, almost systematically connected to the question of diversity : this diversity has to serve the effectiveness of the armed forces. Here, the influence of social logic on the armed forces is maximum. Netherlands, from a long time, recognize cultural and religious diversity, and at an institutional and political level (even if the sensitivity of the soldiers can be different). The German situation is shared on this level, that can explain certain tensions and debates (offseted by the lessons of the history). As for Spain, recent country of immigration, the approach of the equal opportunity is privileged. Also Spain recognizes a broad autonomy with the areas that make it up, a certain linguistic diversity. Conversely, in France, the logic of unity is clearly affirmed, even if some changes are perceptible with the process of decentralization and the modernization of the civil service. In United Kingdom, ethnic diversity is rather easily recognized there and allowed even if that causes tensions. The colonial history seems to appear determining on this level. The question of the representativeness is also proposed even institutionalized in the official speeches and policies, in particular about this question of diversity. The armed forces as representative institution means less statistical representativeness than a social representativeness. All the citizens must be represented in the armed forces but not necessarily on the same scale. The interesting thing here is to understand how each country (for those who have an official goal) calculate their own limit for the percentage of women. This question would deserve to be thorough insofar as it is a question of reflecting on the functions of the armed forces and their specificities compared to the other institutions. Lastly, this question of the representation and more generally the question of the access of women in the armed forces also was essential via policies of principle and action, at national level as at international level.

Policies versus actions : the example of positive action

Otherwise, three of the six countries seem to have more active policies and actions about a better integration of women within the forces, civilian as military women. This is the case for Canada, Netherlands and Spain, even if it appears difficult to know if these actions are really effective, have a real influent and effect power or are just announcements without real results and convictions.

One of the reaction is the phenomenon of positive action within the military, especially for women in higher rank, but not only. Some countries already have positive action when others will apply a positive action soon or plan to do it.

⁵ Even in Spain where the process appears more tardily.

In Germany, from January 2005, the armed forces should apply a quasi-preferential treatment for women soldiers: if a male and a female applicant for a position in the Bundeswehr have the same performance, the position will be given to the female soldier. This discussion could be a reason for new debate, and in the long term, a cause for substantial conflict among men and women in the Bundeswehr. Men may raise protests for being discriminated. They may also point women who have made a military career arguing that this is not related to performance, but to a gender position. Thus, the integration of women in the Bundeswehr may become more difficult.

In Netherlands, the statement⁶ by the Secretary of State for the Armed Forces Van der Knaap, made at a symposium⁷, indicates that the present status of women in the military is changing. He in fact wants the first female general installed during the term that he will be in office, meaning that this will happen before or in 2007. At last a few women will reach the highest ranks. It might even take a change of personnel policy. Traditional policies are that higher-ranking officers all have to serve in combat units. The Secretary of State is prepared to change this policy if he has to and promote females general using the side door, meaning that he could recruit top ranking officers from outside the organization instead of promoting people from within the organization : "One can imagine to recruit a female high potential straight from the civil service or from business enterprises".

In Canada, since the end of the 1990' a number of places are reserved to women at the command and staff college. It seems that this measure does not have a lot of support from officers, men as women. In fact, some women refused to join this college because they were behind some men who were not accepted.

This comparison shows that some countries are ready to go further away to be sure that more women can have access to the highest ranks and positions. The question is if these actions will have a negative effects on the relationships between men and women and on the credibility of women, a credibility that is often difficult for women to obtain, without these positive action.

Armed forces, State and Society

Thus, the question of military specificity appeared central: at the beginning of the research the assumption was that a strong or a weak degree of military specificity (strong specificity in United Kingdom and France, weak specificity in Netherlands and Canada, and two intermediate situations in Germany and Spain), could explain the place of women in the armed forces.

This specificity raise to analyse the characteristics of the relationships between the armed forces and the society. However it seems that the concerned countries also illustrate the diversity of the possible links: fruits of different histories, and particular social contexts, these elements contribute to the position of the armed forces within the society and its evolution. However this position seems to be required for the integration of women in the armed forces: more the military institution will appear apart more the influences of the society will be reduced and more the implementation of this process will initially proceed from a military logic more than from a social logic. It is the case for United Kingdom and France. The inverse case would be Canada and Netherlands. As for Germany and Spain, they represent also an intermediate situation.

New assumptions can be built in order to explain this position: a possible assumption would be that the position of the armed forces, for the society, would be all the stronger⁸, that the type of State in the country is considered as strong, would be clearly differentiated to the society: it's the case of France, typical example of the "State-Nation", contrary to Netherlands and Canada, more characterised by a "weak" State, where the military institution would have a position of pronounced dependence. Germany and Spain could constitute intermediate cases, marked both by a strong official State differentiation in the past with a rejection of militarism and are in a reversed situation although they are very different one from the other.

Of course, these assumptions do not make it possible to explain the fact that the integration of women in the British armed forces was possible initially from military requirements. Moreover, for Spain and Germany, this type of explanation should not undervalue another essential variable: the recent history and the role that armed forces could play in this recent history. In the first case, Spain, the military institution could be suspected of collusion with the Franco government.

⁶ "If it is up to me, the Armed Forces will have their first female general this decade using the front door or the side door".

⁷ "25 years female officers at the Royal Netherlands Military Academy".

⁸ That does not mean that the armed forces would be completely independent of any influence, and even of the political power.

The process of democratization of the Spanish government, begun in the middle of 1970', will touch also the military institution. In the second case, Germany, the facts are also known: the fears of any resurgence of "German militarism" affected the reconstitution of Bundeswehr after Second World War. For Marie-Agnes Barrère-Maurisson and Gilles Robert⁹, the German system is liberal and democratic and aims at guaranteeing the integration of the armed forces in the State and the society, and putting the soldiers through some control mechanisms in order to ensure of the respect of the constitutional principles.

Then, as Christopher Dandeker and David Mason¹⁰ suggest, it is necessary to resort to another variable : the concept of national identity with the weight of the military on it. We find again our typology. On one side, United Kingdom and France, where the reference to the military history and the strength is very important and give to the national identity a special tonality, martial and masculine. In the other side, Canada and Netherlands are in an opposite situation by expressing, for example, in Netherlands, the idea of a sovereignty based on international alliances and the importance of the trade as a founding and characteristic element of the Netherlands nation. Canada and Netherlands are "non-warlike" society. In the middle, Spain and Germany where the national identity could have a martial dimension, but this one either illegitimate or is moderated by the primacy of other sources of identification. In Spain, it is perhaps the royalty.

As it could appear in other comparative research, the implemented policies often contribute to the preservation of the identity of the armed forces and that this one has part related to the national identity; both are in a dialectical relationship.

Conclusion

Three principal dimensions articulate this research: firstly, the armed forces structural changes (international safety, end of conscription, format); secondly, the principal steps of the integration and the status of women in the armed forces, as of the evolution of the national and supranational legislation about it. Thirdly, the military culture and its history (missions...). Thus, these three dimensions enable to better understand the factors (direct or not) about the various degrees of participation of the women in the armed forces in each society. This viewpoint meet the model suggested by Segal and Iskra.¹¹

This research points out that the differences are not really related to the national policies themselves in terms of equality between the sexes, because they are quite equivalent from a country to another. But the differences are clear on the way in which these countries in general, and the armed forces in particular, applied these policies. Some countries (Canada and Netherlands) appear largely more active than others (France and United Kingdom). Moreover, official policies and favorable statistical data do not guarantee a good integration of women as Carreiras¹² showed in her work.

That's why it's difficult to give conclusions in order to compare the policies and their application. For example, in France the relatively high percentage of women in the armed forces in comparison to the other countries correspond to the increase of short contracts in all the ranks. In this situation the progression of women in the hierarchy will not be done at the same speed as for men, in particular for the officers. This situation is the same for dutch female officers. The integration of women in officers ranks could be a subject itself because it seems easier to pass by the "large door" in some armed forces than in others. That will permit to approach the question of the relationship between armed forces and society, for example in terms of schools systems from the higher studies.

All in all, beyond the centrality of the national context in this research, it is noted that the question of the integration of women raises the same problems, the same questions in the five countries. That means that even Spanish and German new recruits are confronted with the same questions as the pioneers and old French or English recruits. Thus, the stakes¹³ are the same in all the considered countries about the place and the integration of the women in the armed forces, with

⁹ BARRERE-MAURISSON M.-A et ROBERT G., *Métier et service public France-Allemagne. L'exemple du système militaire*, Paris, La documentation française, 1994.

¹⁰ DANDEKER C. et MASON D., "Diversifying the Uniform : The participation of Minority Ethnic Personnel in the British Armed Services", *Armed Forces and Society*, 29, 4, 2003, pp. 492-495.

¹¹ ISKRA, D., S. TRAINOR, M. LEITHAUSER, and M. W. SEGAL. (2002). 'Women's Participation in Armed Forces Cross-Nationally: Expanding Segal's Model.' *Current Sociology*, 50(5), pp. 771-797.

¹² CARREIRAS H., *Gender and the Military. A comparative Study of the Participation of Women in the Armed Forces of Western Democracies*. Florence: European University Institute, 2004.

¹³ Among the crucial stakes we find those relating to the physical standards, cohesion, the conciliation between the family life and the professional life, the relationship between men and women in the units, the place of women in the combat arms.

the idea that women constitute a disturbing element, in particular in the traditional idea of the military culture. In addition, the concept of equality also makes debate and the adapted interpretations and solutions are different. So, the presence of women and the efforts produced to better integrate them are also a source of innovation and modernization. We are confronted with the tension between the operational requirements and the social requirements, between the military stakes and the social stakes. Also, the "juridization" of the integration of women in the armed forces could appear as a danger because of the constraints, abusive formalization of the relationship between the sexes, to the detriment of the reality of the everyday life in the military units.

Finally, it comes out from this comparative investigation that the integration of women in the armed forces was done under the civil legal influence, even if the national context are different from a country to another. The application of the principle of equality within the armed forces creates a dynamics that goes in the direction of the changes met by the concerned armed forces and contributes to justify the integration of women in a traditionally male environment. That does not mean that the integration of women is an easy process insofar as, as the comparison reveals, measurements taken contribute to the preservation of the identity of the armed forces that, itself, has part related to the national identity. Interfering between these two levels, the place of women also reveals a tension between pressure of the social and military logics, between two sources of legitimacy which it is a question of reconciling because it goes there from the legitimacy of the military institution itself in the society in a more general context of "debellicisation".