WOMEN SOLDIERS OF NATO COUNTRIES IN COMBAT DUTY

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Abstract: Military service by women was expanded in Western European NATO countries only after a long process, which included professional and public debates before any significant changes were enacted. The end of the Cold War and its bipolar world order, along with its associated transformation of the social environment and of the duties expected of the military force resulted in a gradual shift in public opinion concerning the role of women in the military. This has also made it possible for women to enter all service positions and to achieve all degrees of rank in the new era, professionalised army. Despite this, the military force essentially continues to be an institute for men; where women have realised gains towards equal opportunities to fulfil their ambitions, but only in a restricted way. Currently, the proportion of women in NATO armies is approximately 10%. Until now only a few women were able to reach the rank of general or other positions of high-command. For the time being they are still not allowed to serve in high-risk specialized units or in dangerous combat duties. Women have the opportunity to prove their military competence primarily in peacekeeper missions.

Representative of Eastern European post-socialist states, Hungary makes efforts to integrate reforms such as these, that have already been initiated in other NATO countries. The situation of Hungarian women soldiers is even more disadvantageous than in Western countries after taking numerous considerations into account such as income-earning potential, and the ability to advance and enact their interests. However, in other ways it is more advantageous for Hungarian women soldiers because their chances of being accepted into military service are greater than in Western countries attributable to the more favorable views for their participation that are expressed by society.

Key words: Soldier women, equal opportunity, women in the Hungarian army, women in combat, peacekeeping.
1. INTRODUCTION

Military service is a field with specific needs that must be considered with regard to equal opportunities between men and women. Although economic, legal, sociological, psychological and other factors influence the situation of women in other fields of life, and are also important in the context of the army, there are additional complexities to take into account. Additionally, it is a national institution with a special scope of duties where traditionally masculine physical and mental abilities have vital importance and where the influence of social attitudes and public opinion is perhaps more determinant than in the case of other professions. Although the police force and other professions which are similarly dangerous have already been open to women for a longer period of time, this process more incremental for the military force. The basic socio-psychological reason is that the main purpose of the activity of the police or other crisis-managing bodies is the protection of human life (and material goods); while in military service it is highly essential to be ready to take the life of others or to offer one’s own life in sacrifice. The majority of people living in countries of the Euro-Atlantic region look upon this duty as a male ‘privilege’ for many centuries (Szabó I., 2009, p. 204).

The military, as one of the least open institutions in society represents a kind of special status in the field of integration of women and the effectiveness of a gender-conscious approach. The role and career opportunities for women in the army are good indicators of the level of emancipation of women, and genuinely reflect a societies’ general opinion of the status of women and the degree of motivation for the actual realisation of equal opportunities.

The following article is a part of a larger study in progress, which deals with women in the armies of both the West and East European NATO countries. Applied methods included bibliographic documentation, processing of available special literature and surveys that have been published.

2. WOMEN SOLDIERS IN NATO COUNTRIES

After World War II, the states of the Euro-Atlantic region gradually opened their armies to women. This process became faster in the 1970’s and 1980’s, and it became general in the period of the millennium, as a result of the end of the Cold War. This was influenced by the gradual change to a voluntary military force and the significant technological developments in the field of national defence. Due to the remission of East - West antagonisms in Europe culminating in the collapse of the Soviet Union, the strategic role of NATO military forces has changed. Political challenges have been redefined to include the fight against terrorism, management of migration problems, and peacekeeping resulting in a reorganization of features of the armed forces as well. The new, more diversified duties needed a broader-
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base of legitimacy in society than before. This legitimacy could be provided by the greater number of women flowing into the armies (Szabó M., 2001, p. 97; Bolgár – Kormos, 1997, p. 25–26).

In this new situation, women proved to be fit for military service in every respect. Some of these changes that improved the capacity of the military to develop more gender equality is that the role of required physical abilities was significantly reduced as a result of upgrading military engineering equipment, changes in military actions and changes in the nature of fighting with the increase in peace-keeping, order-keeping and crisis-management and. Instead, other intellectual, mental, cognitive and motivational factors became important. Transformation of the social environment of the armed forces, the change in the division of labour in families, the increasing public role of women, made it fundamentally possible for women to achieve all service positions and degrees of rank in the new-era armies as they became increasingly professionalised and specialised. The receptiveness to women in the military increased due to the fact that the military profession and the related collective values, to a certain extent, became less important in the eyes of young people resulting in a decrease in the number of men applying for military service into voluntary armies. Therefore, the admission of women into armies became even more important. Women were motivated primarily by the possibility of establishing their own living, earning a decent income, having the possibility for advancement and as well as social prestige. In many cases, family traditions such as the influence of father or brother who was a soldier took great part in the choice (Segal, 1995, p. 759; Harris, 1997, pp. 25–26; Franke, 1997, p. 249).

However, the integration of women into the army did not take place without problems. No uniform policy concerning women’s military service has been developed in NATO countries. National traditions and their social and cultural features have resulted in significant differences between NATO countries. While in the USA or France women have been serving as soldiers for more than a half century, in Spain they have only been employed since 1988 and Italian women have only recently had the chance to make a career as soldiers since 2000. In the Bundeswehr of Germany, women have been in military service since 1975, although, primarily in health fields and other positions have only been open to them since 2000. In countries such as Holland or the Czech Republic an obligatory recruitment will be ordered for women only in case of war or mobilization (Szabó M., 2001, pp. 102–104; Garcia – Siposné 2000, p. 111). Currently there are more countries seeking to expand this option for women. In Norway, surveys tabulate that 55% of women and 62% of men would stand behind a measure to make the military accessible to women.
The presence of larger numbers of women in the military has brought up numerous practical problems to be resolved such as the troubles arising from working in close quarters, the special demands of lodging and clothing (which go beyond simply smaller or larger sizes), the tone of communication previously used needed to become more gender sensitive, and also more opportunities for closer contact with families needed to be provided. When women were only a few positions in the military, in several units and only in smaller numbers, these factors arose only as individual problems that could be ignored or managed with ad hoc solutions. When women joined the service in greater numbers, these problems rose to the surface; the overall regulation of the matter and the establishment of stakeholder forums became inevitable.

Earlier, in some NATO countries, the primary military training for women joining the army took place separately from men, isolated into a special program. However, most armies have adopted a common, integrated military training program since the 1990’s; special trainings are applied only in a few countries (such as Greece and Turkey). In 1997 the US Senate committee formed to investigate sexual harassment cases which occurred, and proposed to conduct training for women separately. However, this proposal was refused by the Department of Defence with reference to the following: separation would make the uniform training more difficult, make the task-focused cohesion weaker, worsen the total integration of women – and all these would decrease the combat efficiency of the army (Enloe, 1993, p. 86; Bolgár – Kormos, 1997, p. 23; Magyar, 1998, pp. 44–45).

Integration of women in NATO armies has not reached gender parity in every respect. The advancement of women is generally slower, with few women attaining higher positions in the command order. Female generals are assigned only in the armies of six NATO states. In the USA, the first woman became a general at the second highest degree of rank in the military designated with 4 stars in 2008. Women can only be found occasionally among the staff in headquarters or in the commanding staff of different military operations. According to Western European surveys, a significant portion of soldiers now consider ability and competence to be the most important criteria for achieving commanding positions, independent of gender. However, a lot of men and women reported that they would rather serve under a male commanding officer. According to them, male commanding officers are more determined, self-confident and cool-headed, while female superiors are more likely to be controlled by their emotions and the pressure to comply. In many cases, some female commanding officers become unnerved due to the extreme intensity and high expectations. Nevertheless, differences between the performance of male and female commanders cannot be generalised; the ability depends rather on the personality and efficacy of the specific individual, and not only on that of gender (Szabó M., 2001, pp. 102–104; Bolgár – Siposné, 2001, pp. 78–79).
Nowadays, the majority of women serving in the armies of NATO countries do not consider gendered discrimination in the workplace to be the greatest problem anymore. Rather, their career prospects are most hampered by gendered expectations in their domestic lives such as that which results from the interruption of their work when starting a family, giving birth and bringing up children. Primarily, the time out of the workforce hinders women’s rapid advancement, because of the difficulty to get the necessary service practice, experience and qualification. Although mothers with small children do not lose their post during their absences, in the meanwhile men have more opportunity to be forwarded in rank earlier. The problems of harmonising family and career obligations arise not only from the special features of military service. They are highly influenced also by the general social conditions and attitudes concerning the social role and labour market position of women, the division of labour in the family and the realisation of equal opportunities. In 2008, the proportion of women serving in the armies of some NATO states was as follows: in the USA 15,4%, Spain 11,7%, France 10,2%, the Netherlands 9,7%, Belgium 9,4%, Norway 8,5%, Germany 6,5% (Szabó I., 2009, pp. 197–198; Karácsony, 2009, pp. 73–75).

3. WOMEN IN THE HUNGARIAN ARMY

During the half century of socialism, a political system completely different from Western civil democracies developed, where the task of military forces and the consideration of women’s role in society was basically different. In the period of the so called ‘nationalised feminism’, complete emancipation was proclaimed, but only in words. The comprehensive employment of women (including in the military corps) just pretended to have achieved gender equity; however, in reality, it served the purposes of state oppression. In the Hungarian military service, women have been almost continuously employed since World War II. At first, they fulfilled positions of lower prestige, but increasingly gained higher posts since they have been opened to them in 1974. Women primarily performed sanitary, logistic, communicative, administrative or educational duties. A certain number of women employed earlier as civilian employees by the army were taken on as staff and as non-commissioned or commissioned officers, even without any military qualifications. The women studying in different universities (medical, judicial, economic) with a Hungarian Army scholarship also became commissioned officers after graduation. But women could not join in the officer training and could not apply for the military academy or college. That is why women serving as commissioned officers were not considered to be equals in rank by their male colleagues (Bolgár – Kormos, 1997, p. 30, 55; Szegő, 2004).

New political and strategic preferences developed after the Regime Change in ’89, with the subsequent shift towards Euro-Atlantic integration, and in parallel, the changes in the expected duties, and the composition of army personnel due to the
changes in public opinion allowing for greater chances for women. After the
dissolution of the conscripted military service, the establishment of the professional
voluntary military force speeded up the integration of women into the army. As a
result of the radical transformation of social values, the fundamental changes in the
labour market position, the legitimacy of military forces demanding a new
legitimacy, the proportion of women in the army increased in the former socialist
countries at a quicker rate than in Western states. In the period passing from
dictatorship to democracy, it became especially important to establish civilian
control over the military force and to strengthen the social acknowledgement of the
necessity of the armed forces. Expansion of women’s military service played a
significant role in this process.

Beside the personal motives (such as testing abilities, the thirst for adventure),
Hungarian women were generally motivated to join the army for the following
reasons: the possibility of establishing an independent living, the system of equal
conditions arising from the strongly formalized nature of the army, the same wage-
system as received by men, various social benefits and further-education
opportunities. The Hungarian Military Service Act published in 1996 provided
completely equal rights to female members of the army. The first female officers
who graduated from the military academy were commissioned in Hungary in 1998.
At that time, 2416 women were in the service of the Hungarian Army, i.e. 4% of
the staff. Out of 461 officers, 4 were able to achieve the rank of colonel. Eight
years later in 2006, as many as 3894 women already joined the military staff: 719
of them serving in the enlisted ranks (18%), 2407 as non-commissioned officers
and ensigns (62%), 768 as commissioned officers, 9 of which were colonels (20%).
These women composed 16% of the strength of the Hungarian Army (Bolgár –

In the Hungarian Army, similar to the majority of other NATO countries, the
expectations concerning women’s physical condition and performance levels are
slightly lower than for men. As a matter of course, good physical condition is still a
basic requirement, but the execution of most duties does not require outstanding
physical abilities. On the other hand, there are no differences between male and
female soldiers in other fields, such as military qualification, service or standby. In
the course of reconstruction, safe-keeping or policing duties performed by peace
missions in war zones, possible clashes, gun-battles and combat are expected at any
time, so the proper combat training of participants is of high importance.
According to psychological surveys conducted in the Hungarian Army, men
perform their military service slightly better than average in stressful crisis
situations which unexpectedly occur. However, the differences are minor and differ
by only a few percentage points, thereby giving no ground to draw a deeper
conclusion. Moreover, the soldiers participating in missions are selected according
to individual considerations, where only the specific preparation of the person is of importance (Kardos, 2000, pp. 108–109; Magyar Honvédség, 2006).

A specific feature is that women joining the army and serving in lower rank generally have attained higher educational levels than men holding similar positions. The reason for this is primarily the contradiction that the military profession (in lower ranks) has little prestige and moderate pay; therefore men with more education are not as motivated to enlist. However, in the middle of more limited chances in broader society, military service becomes more attractive to women because of the possibility of earning an independent living and opportunities for promotion.

According to the results of empirical surveys conducted in Western European countries, public opinion in the 1990’s was still strongly divided concerning the issue of women in the military. The majority of men regarded it to be improper for women to enter the army. Conversely, according to Hungarian research, the majority of Hungarian society, including men, clearly supported women’s participation in the military with surveys showing that this was considered acceptable by 59% of men in 1994, 66% in 2002 and 78% in 2008. On the basis of the latest facts and figures, only 22% of men and 12% of women categorically rejected women’s military service. According to this research, the majority of women serving in the Hungarian Army feel that their position is accepted in the military force, and only 10% stated that women are negatively discriminated against (Bolgár – Gál, 2006, pp. 118–119; Blaskó, 2005, pp. 165, 173–175).

4. COMBAT DUTY AND PEACE MISSIONS

Based on the fact that women now play a greater role in the military, the issue of combat duties has emerged as a special problem. By the end of the 20th century, women’s military service became generally accepted, but sharp debates developed concerning the combat disposition of women. Public opinion, as well as military leaders in Western countries, were strongly divided by the possibility that women should fight hand to hand with the enemy in the line of fire, and that they might die or fall into captivity in the course of combat. A lot of pro and con arguments were raised which acknowledged or disputed the fitness of women for these kinds of duties. The majority of people rejected the idea of assigning women to combat positions for long periods of time.

In 1989, Canadian feminist organisations achieved victories in judicial proceedings to allow women to perform combat duties. Similarly, the European Court decided in 1996 that the German Bundeswehr violated the rights of women when it did not allow them to serve in positions other than in public health (this was decided in connection with a private prosecution, the case of Tanja Kreil). This equality of access was also reached in numerous other countries through many
years of struggle to allow women to fulfil duties of this type. The significant change in the nature of battle contributed towards making combat positions available to women. The importance of hand-to-hand combat decreased, and the physical requirements for handling technical equipment also decreased. However, it has been found that army commanders try to avoid charging women with duties which are more likely to be accompanied by gun-battle or close fighting (García – Siposné, 2000, pp. 111–112; Teamwork, 2000).

The former exclusion of women from combat positions had deeper social causes. In spite of the modernisation of European societies and the resulting changes in public opinion concerning gender, traditional attitudes towards gender with regard to the army is still alive: i.e. women should give birth to children for society and men should sacrifice their lives for it if necessary. Even the most open-minded communities generally advocate traditional values when confronted with the question of life and death. Soldier women have already been accepted as living heroes in many countries – but not as war dead (especially when they are mothers with children). Losing women begins to destroy the tolerance of society, questioning the justification of women’s participation in conflict, and the propriety of decisions made by military leaders. Almost half of the number of women serving in the military consider women to be less effective than men in some positions (such as those that include heavy and long-lasting stress associated with combat duties), while in other fields women and men are thought to provide equal performance in every respect (Elshatian, 1995, p. 261; Szabó, 2009, pp. 204–205; Karácsony, 2009, pp. 74–75).

During the Gulf War in 1991, the proportion of women was 1.7% in the American armed forces. However, by the time military operations against Iraq started in 2004, already 14% of soldiers who played an active role were women. This continued during the occupation of Iraqi territories. The percentage of women serving in Afghanistan was 10% of American forces.

Although women are allowed to serve in active combat positions in most countries, there are still some military duties that they are not permitted to fill. First of all these are positions requiring great physical and psychological effort, such as in case of those with possible close combat or even physical contact with the enemy, and where women are at risk of being captured. So, particular units of the armed forces, such as the special commandos, reconnaissance and mounted units or the Foreign Legion continue to be “men clubs” (Phillips, 1998, p. 22; Magyar, 1998, p. 45).

Women have already been assigned to fighting in the rifle-corps of the United States’ Army (and also participate as truck drivers, radio operators, and gunners), while special rules dictate that women are prohibited from serving in direct close combat such as the occupation of buildings. In this way, they are only allowed to
Women refused by the special corps of the Royal Marines in Great Britain applied in vain to the European Court of Justice for legal remedy. For example, in 1999 this body declared the British decision not to be unlawful discrimination because it was adequately justified by the special nature of the duty and the exceptional abilities required to perform it. Notwithstanding, in 2002 a woman (Captain Philippa Tattersal) succeeded, after numerous failed attempts, to fulfil the performance level stipulated by the cream of the green beret corps and was then allowed to join the unit. However, she may not be assigned direct combat duties, and she can only provide combat safety support or combat service support.

In Hungary, combat positions have been open to women since 1996. More women are serving in the Rapid Deployable Corps of NATO as rifle-(wo)men, truck drivers and gunners. However, women are not employed by the special corps. Similar to most other NATO countries, it is a basic principle in the Hungarian Army to exclude women from duties with obvious gun-battles or close combat. Naturally, women serving in combat positions are fully drilled and trained for these combat actions as well, but military leaders try to avoid placing women into combat situations (Yuval-Davis, 1991; Bolgár – Kormos, 1997, p. 53).

Female soldiers play a significant role in various peacemaking and peacekeeping missions. NATO has commanded women in greater numbers for these services since 1996, with the beginning of the peacekeeping operations after the Bosnian War. As a result of this fact, the available forces could be better utilised, applied more extensively and effectively. Although, peacekeeping operations participate in controlling, policing, and deterring forces where the organisation of reconstruction is dominant, occasionally collisions occur as well. Special policing and capturing actions, as well as the prevention of shock-actions, require direct participation in combat.

In addition to combat duties, the following features play a significant role in foreign missions: good communication, empathy, capability to handle crises, and sensitivity for humanitarian issues all of which require a special disposition. Of course, it is debatable that these skills are generally typical of women and to what extent. But it has proved to be true in many cases that the presence of women means a great help in these fields. Their participation is symbolic for the people concerned, facilitating the cooperation between parties. In certain cultures, such as in the Muslim region where communication with local women is controlled by hard-and-fast rules, the employment of female soldiers is essential for the successful execution of the duties. The Committee on Women in the NATO Forces urges member states to cease restrictions that still exist, with reference to results achieved in peacekeeping missions. Nowadays only a few countries (such as Greece and Turkey) exclude women from their combat positions (Szlazsánszky, 2003; Nagyné, 2007, p. 10; Phillips, 1998, p. 22).
The Hungarian Army joined the international peace missions in greater forces in 1996, with more than 4000 Hungarian soldiers serving abroad since 2003. Women are present in many contingents, such as in the units of IFOR, SFOR, KFOR and also in the effective force of the Hungarian unit serving in Afghanistan.

In the international peacekeeping armed forces serving in Kosovo since 1999, women soldiers represented 5% of the Italian contingent, 6% of the Slovenian, and 8% of the Spanish contingent. The proportion of women was 10% in the Hungarian company of the unit. This data is significantly less than the average proportion of women serving in the armies of the specific countries listed. This can be partly explained by the fact that a great part of women serving in the army do not fulfil combat positions. Only a narrow circle of women can be employed in peacekeeping missions. As only a few of them have longer military experience, and newly trained female soldiers are not allowed to serve in such positions. Only a small number of women (being otherwise suitable) apply for such missions because of the long separation from the family and great distances. The conditions for getting into the unit are the same for everybody: professional efficiency in connection with the specific mission, knowledge of foreign languages, good state of health, mental suitability and the necessary level of physical fitness (Magyar Honvédség, 2006; Csabai – Szántó, 2001, pp. 45–46).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Few people dispute that women are as important in the armed forces, as men. It is increasingly accepted to allow women to also serve in combat positions. These factors are equally important in many respects such as the establishment of a more open social attitude, the consequent realisation of equality before law, the rational operation of the labour market as well as the social legitimacy of the army. However, the ambitions and advancement of women are still restricted in the armies of NATO countries, arising partially from the traditional internal relations and specific duties of the armies, but to some extent from the general state of society and of public thinking. Military force with its associated values, pressures, sacrifices and powers of destruction can still be considered as a male-focused micro-world, where women are regarded as just uniformed employees and not as real “fighters”.

With the inclusion of women’s military service, Hungary (similar to other Eastern European post-socialist countries) lags behind Western states in many respects such as the stability of living independently, the career possibilities, the higher positions, the safeguarding of interests, and the issues of income and services; but in other respects, considering the quick increase of the rate of women and the acceptance of the military profession for women, the situation is much better than in Western societies. This can be explained by the specific historic and social relations of the region and the social dynamics of the Regime Change in ’89.
In spite of the results achieved in many questions of detail, as is expectable, the principle of equal opportunities will be completely realised in the long run only as part of an overall change in social approach.

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