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No. 140/2011 dated 5 October 2011

Women at War: Possible Lessons for Small States

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Synopsis

Women in the military, it seems, are on the march. A trend is emerging where female military members are assuming roles closer to the front-line. It is a growing phenomenon with particular relevance to small states with limited human resources.

Commentary

'WOMEN WARRIORS' is an evocative term. Yet, increasingly, countries are fostering the empowerment of women in the military, recognising the important role that women can play in national defence. However, countries that allow women to assume combat roles amount to just five percent of the world's militaries, so clearly gender equality has still a long way to go.

The stereotyped role of military women remains one focused on support duties: boys can dream of becoming a commando, but girls are confined to nursing or administration, not as front-line infantry. This 'sticky floor and glass ceiling' characteristic of the military gender divide has proven incredibly difficult to overcome, but breakthroughs are now emerging.

Breakthroughs on the Front-Line

Women are operating in the conflict zones of Iraq and Afghanistan, where the 'front-line' is fuzzy and difficult to define. France and Germany, for instance, are two of the advanced military powers that allow women to assume combat roles. Yet, while both countries have female military forces in Afghanistan (165 German in 2010; 34 French, in 2010), reports appear to indicate they are mostly accorded administrative, logistic and paramedic posts.

Confusingly, while the United States does not allow full military gender equality – the Pentagon barring women from role where the primary mission is direct ground combat – women are allowed to serve in units that 'might' engage in combat-related action. Women account for just over 14 percent (203,000 out of 1.4 million) of US active-duty service personnel, around 18 percent of the National Guard and Reserve Forces, and some 10 percent of the forces in Iraq and Afghanistan (approximately 25,000 military women). As of March 2011, there have been 3,708 US military fatalities from these two conflicts. Women, who make up around 8.4 percent of US forces, accounted for 2.4 percent of the fatalities, some 113 of the total.

The UK also bars female ground close-combat roles, but as with their American counterparts, this does not spare them in conflict, with British female combat fatalities in both Iraq and Afghanistan numbering eight (July,

2011). In other significant policy developments, British military women are breaking the mould. In August this year, Britain's Royal Navy appointed a woman to command a front-line warship, the first time in the 500-year history of the Senior Service. The Lieutenant Commander will take control of HMS Portland, a Type 23 Frigate, in April 2012, operating missiles and anti-submarine torpedoes.

Gender: No Barrier for Small States?

As small states tend to suffer more from human resource constraints compared to their big country counterparts, three factors are of particular importance in building a defence posture: firstly, technology multipliers are sought to compensate for limitations in the numbers of military personnel; secondly, reservist numbers rise compared to regulars in the armed forces; and, thirdly, gender in combat is less likely the preserve of a traditional male-dominated mind-set.

Thus, recent events have led to a questioning of the barriers to deployment of military women in combat roles. Perhaps the most ambitious narrowing of the military gender gap is Australia's recent opening of front-line combat roles to women. The country's first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, has called for physical and intellectual capacity to be the qualifying factors for military roles, rather than gender. This ADF policy demarche means that women can become snipers, commandos and even commanders-in-chief.

Already this year, Canberra allowed women sailors to board with men in submarines, replacing an earlier ruling that women submariners sleep in female-only six berth cabins. Women can also pilot attack helicopters and fighter jets. However, women have been barred from army 'close' combat roles found in the infantry and special forces. Though Australia is a continental state it has a relatively small population of 22 million and a medium defence status. This relatively small human resource capacity is possibly why 10,000 of the ADF's 81,000 full- and part-time military personnel are women, and over 97 percent of ADF jobs are open to women.

Is Australia's major change in military gender policy an isolated event, or part of a global trend towards military emancipation of women? It is possibly too early to make a call, but a wind of change is emerging, and sometimes from surprising quarters. Afghanistan, a deeply Islamic country, announced in early July that four Afghan women would commence hands-on military helicopter pilot training in 2012. This is a dramatic gender breakthrough for the Afghan air force that is aiming to become 'self-operational' by 2016.

An array of small states such as Canada, Denmark, Finland, Israel, New Zealand, Serbia, Sweden and Switzerland, allow women to assume combat roles. Scandinavia, in particular, is a bulwark of military gender equality. Danish women have served in combat roles since 1988, Swedish women since 1989, and Norwegian military women also enjoy equal occupational rights.

Perhaps the benchmark for deployment of military women to front-line duties is Israel. Women comprise around 34 percent of Israeli Defence Force (IDF) personnel, assuming combat roles in all three land, air and sea branches of the armed forces. On average, about three percent of all IDF officers are women, and, annually, around 1,500 women are drafted into the Israeli military.

Finally, in Singapore, women were allowed to join the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) since 1969 in non-combat capacities, but it was 25 years later, in 1994, that women began assuming combat roles. After a hesitant start, women have increasingly been given the opportunity to prove themselves in command positions. Women SAF officers now command artillery battalions, naval mine countermeasure vessels and airforce squadrons. They are Regimental Sergeant Majors and mortar platoon leaders in infantry units. Significantly, they have been deployed on operational duties as part of a 13-strong military medical team sent to Afghanistan in 2009. Currently there are 1,700 female SAF personnel, accounting for approximately five percent of the regular forces.

Policy Implications

Women in combat is a difficult and controversial issue. It is widely known that women are often the victims of conflict, but there is obvious incongruity between women and what might be termed the 'warrior class'. Clearly, there are concerns about women's physical capabilities, operational effectiveness, and societal reactions if military women are captured, killed or maimed. In parallel with the broader social movement towards gender equality, women are slowly winning the right to fight for their country. But only time will tell whether society has the stomach for the consequences.

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