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## Introduction

Historically, women have been systematically excluded from roles within the military, and while progress has been made regarding integration, significant challenges persist in achieving full equality and addressing persistent gender biases. Throughout most of history, specifically up until the late 20th century, the military was perceived as a male-dominated field due to societal norms that placed importance on traditional gender roles (Segal, 1995, p. 758). Consequently, women were mostly confined to non-combat positions such as nursing, telephone operators and clerks (National Army Museum, 2018). However, as society has progressed, the roles of women in the military have expanded and evolved accordingly. With the 20th century enduring two world wars, there was a significant change in expectations and perspectives as women played more active and key roles during these conflicts, laying the groundwork to expand women's participation in the military. As time progressed, policy and legal changes across Europe have created new opportunities for women to serve not only in a supporting role but also in combat and leadership roles as well.

The participation of women in the military is an important step towards the larger mission of achieving gender equality and social progress. Although there has been significant progress made in the integration of women into the European armed forces, pervasive challenges such as discrimination, gender bias and physical barriers remain (Parliamentary Assembly, 2016). These obstacles impede the equal and complete participation of women within the military. This paper will provide a historical overview of the role of women in the military armed forces. It will do so by giving insights into the advancement of the role of women in European armed forces, focusing on countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Greece, Norway, Germany and Sweden, while addressing the chronic obstacles that must be overcome to achieve equality. It will ultimately demonstrate notable progress within these European countries, challenges such as gender biases, unequal access to leadership roles and how insufficient support for women in combat continues to hinder full integration and equal participation within European armed forces.

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## Historical Overview

Until 1940, women's participation within military activities was mostly restricted to nursing and support roles (Jauneau, Le Gac, Ripa, & Virgili, 2020). Although these roles are integral, they reflected the broader social perspective that women were maternal caregivers rather than combatants. This can be seen through Segal's analysis of the social contention of family and women in military which highlights that "Cultures often see the mothering role as antithetical to the warrior role; giving life in childbirth is seen as the opposite of taking life in war" (Segal, 1995, p. 770). During both World Wars, women were usually called to aid in medical capacities, ammunition testing and supply management, thus being kept on the periphery of military operations rather than at the centre (National Army Museum, 2018). The instances of women serving as combatants were extremely rare and usually overlooked in historical narratives, which usually focused on male soldiers. However, during World War I, British women did serve in uniform, primarily in non-combat roles within the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force. For example, Florence Green, who served in the RAF, was the last known surviving veteran of World War I, and passed away in 2012 (National WWI Museum and Memorial, 2018). This highlights the vital yet frequent unacknowledged roles that women played outside the direct combat.

The aftermath of World War II underscored a turning point in the role of women within the military. The war had demonstrated women's capabilities in various non-combat roles such as intelligence, communications and technical support which were integral to the war effort. Women were conscripted during this time, as seen in the United Kingdom and Germany (Segal, 1995, p. 760). Women were labelled as non-combatants in the United Kingdom and placed into positions which were labelled as civilian jobs in Germany (Segal, 1995, p. 760). Female conscription differed from that of males, with varying conditions based on factors such as marital status, age and whether they had children (Segal, 1995, p. 760). These differences reflected the societal norms of the time which prioritised their roles as wives and mother over their military duties (Segal, 1995, p. 760). As seen in the United Kingdom, a second National Service Act was passed in December 1941 which included the conscription of unmarried women and all childless widows between the ages of 20 and 30 (UK Parliament, 2020).

Once they were within the military system, they were given a choice to work in industry or join "one of the auxiliary services - the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) or the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS)" (Imperial War Museum, 2023). Women created an important support system to the United Kingdom's military war effort and displayed their significance by filling necessary roles such as maintaining and repairing vessels, operating machinery within factories and performing critical logistical tasks. Their contribution guaranteed that the armed forces had the necessary equipment and supplies and their roles within the auxiliary services allowed men to be deployed to combat zones. This support was crucial for conserving the overall readiness and effectiveness of the military.

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From 1950, policy and legal changes were pivotal in formalising the inclusion of women in European armed forces. Key milestones allowed women to join the military in various capacities, eventually leading to their participation in combat roles. In the second half of the 20th century French agencies implemented policies that opened more roles to women within the military, though not without challenges (Martin, 1982, p. 313). As stated in the article “The Feminization of European Armies,” the decree of October 15, 1951 defined a status for female cadres, and the law of July 13, 1972, established equality of the sexes in theory. However, despite the competitive entrance exam for the *École Polytechnique* being open to women in 1970, the *École Spéciale Militaire de Saint-Cyr* did not welcome the first female student-officers until 1983 (Jauneau et al., 2020). This indicates that although women were able to further their education within a prestigious university in 1970, they were not able to participate in the aforementioned military institution until 13 years later. These changes were not only driven by a genuine commitment to gender integration but were also influenced by feminist movements advocating for women’s rights and equality (Spencer, n.d.). This approach to expanding women’s access to the military highlights the complex interplay of social and political factors that shaped the gradual shift towards gender equality. Germany’s pathway toward integrating women into its military was delayed by the context of post-World War I, when the country was initially limited in its rearming and maintaining of military force due to the Treaty of Versailles. In 1975, women were officially allowed to serve in the German military but limited to the medical services before being welcomed into the military music corps in 1991 (Bundeswehr, n.d.). It was not until January 11th, 2000, that a landmark ruling by the European Court of Justice compelled Germany to allow women to serve in all military roles, including combat positions (Broughton, 2000). This ruling was the result of a case brought by Tanja Kreil, a German woman who wanted to join the weapons electronic maintenance service of the Federal German army (Broughton, 2000).

However, her application was denied due to Article 12a of Germany’s Basic Law forbidding women from serving in roles that involve the use of weapons (Broughton, 2000). At the time of her application in 1996, the legislation governing soldiers (*Soldatengesetz*) only allowed women to be recruited as volunteers in the medical and military music services (Broughton, 2000). Ms. Kreil challenged this ruling, and it was brought to the European Court of Justice, which ruled that the German legislation preventing the employment of women in roles that involve the use of weapons is against the Community principle of equal treatment between men and women (Broughton, 2000). After this ruling Germany quickly reformed its military policies to comply with the court, and by 2001 women were fully integrated into the *Bundeswehr*, with access to all roles including combat positions (Bundeswehr, n.d.). These legal transitions highlight a significant moment in the broader European trend of gender

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integration in the military, demonstrating Germany's adaption to both domestic pressures and broader European legal standards.

## **Progress of Women's Integration into the Armed Forces**

The integration of women into the armed forces varies significantly across different countries, reflecting diverse cultural attitudes, policy approaches and historical contexts. According to "Gender Equality/Women in the Armed Forces of 2023," a EUROMIL survey of 12 European countries, "the overall participation of women in the Armed Forces is 13%" (EUROMIL, 2023). Sweden and Norway are often cited as leaders in gender integration within their armed forces, with women comprising 23% of military personnel in Sweden as of 2022 and 15% in Norway in 2021 (Statista, 2022; Wong, 2022). These countries have implemented comprehensive policies not only to recruit women but to ensure their retention and progression within the military. Sweden and Norway have made significant improvements in integrating women into their armed forces. One of the key policies that drive this integration is the introduction of a gender-neutral conscription. In 2010, Sweden suspended its mandatory military service but reintroduced it in 2017, making it gender neutral (Strand, 2023). This policy has been influential in increasing the percentage of women in the armed forces to 23% as of 2022 (EUROMIL 2023). Norway introduced their gender-neutral conscription in 2016 (Security women, 2021). As a result, the proportion of the women in the Norwegian Armed Forces was 15% in 2021 (EUROMIL, 2023).

In contemporary European armed forces, women now occupy a wide range of roles, including leadership positions, combat roles and specialised units. This marks a significant departure from the past where women were largely confined to supporting or non-combat roles. The increasing presence of women in combat roles has been made possible by various countries implementing new legislation and policies that promote equal access for women to serve on the front lines and in other critical military areas. Although women are still underrepresented in leadership positions, these are becoming more accessible as seen by the appointment of female generals and high-ranking officials in various European countries. Out of the 23 NATO member states with available data, only 3 have any women occupying high-ranking positions, such as general officers (Gender Statistics Database, 2023). While women are present among the mid-ranking officers (senior or field grade officers) their representation varies significantly, reaching a maximum of 17% in Hungary and a minimum of 2% in Austria and Finland (Gender Statistics Database, 2023). One notable example of female leadership in the military is Major General Kristin Lund of Norway, who in 2014 became the first woman to command a United Nations peacekeeping force (United Nations, 2014). This milestone underscores the efforts made to promote gender equality within the leadership of the military sector and challenges long-standing stereotypes about women's roles and contributions in the armed forces.

To further promote gender equality within the military, several European countries have implemented a range of policy reforms. Initiatives such as Norway's gender-neutral conscription

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policy, introduced in 2013, have been particularly effective in normalising the presence of women in the armed forces and ensuring they are viewed as equal contributors (Skard, 2015). Moreover, various programs have also been developed to increase the retention of women by fostering a more inclusive military culture that values diversity and directly addresses the challenges faced by female soldiers (Prudhoe et al., 2024). While significant progress has been made, challenges persist, particularly in ensuring that policy changes translate into genuine cultural shifts within the military. Nevertheless, ongoing reforms reflect a strong commitment to making the armed forces more representative of the societies they serve, enabling men and women to serve side by side with equal opportunities and respect.

## **Challenges Faced by Women in the Armed Forces**

Despite the strides made in integrating women into the armed forces, significant challenges remain, particularly in overcoming gender bias and discrimination. Institutional and cultural resistance to women's full integration continues to manifest in various ways, such as the assumption that women are less capable of handling the physical and emotional demands of military life (Angehrn et al., 2021). According to an internal survey by EUROMIL, women in the armed forces often face issues such as bullying, sexual assault, harassment, uniform/equipment not being suitable for female soldiers and female military personnel seldomly reaching high ranking positions unlike their male counterparts (Koutouzi, 2023). These ongoing challenges highlight the complex and deep-rooted nature of achieving true gender equality within the military. While policies and legal frameworks have evolved to support women's integration, the persistence of gender bias reveals the deeper cultural issues that cannot be easily addressed through legislation alone. A fundamental shift in military culture is required to not only recognise the capabilities of women but also to actively dismantle the barriers that prevent them from fully participating and advancing within the armed forces.

Women in the armed forces also face unique psychological challenges that can hinder their full participation. High levels of stress are common among female soldiers, not only due to the inherent pressures of military life but also due to the added burden of harassment and discrimination (Parliamentary Assembly, 2016). Sexual harassment and assault are particularly serious issues that disproportionately affect women in the military, creating environments of fear and isolation in some instances (Brown et al., 2021). Furthermore, balancing military service with family life presents a unique challenge for women, who are often expected to prioritise their roles as caregivers (House of Commons Defence Committee, 2021). This dual burden can lead to burnout and may limit career progression opportunities (Nilsen et al., 2017).

Career advancement as well as representation are additional areas where women face considerable barriers. Despite the growing presence of women in the armed forces, they continue to be underrepresented in the higher ranks and decision-making roles (Robinson & O'Hanlon, 2020). This lack of representation is partially due to persistent gender biases and institutional

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barriers, but it is also a product of structural issues within the military. These barriers not only hinder individual women's careers but also deprive the military of the diverse perspectives that female leadership can bring. Overcoming these challenges requires sustained effort to not only promote more women into leadership roles, but also to change the culture that continues to view them as exceptions rather than equals. A more inclusive military culture that values diversity and actively works to remove systemic barriers is essential for ensuring that women can fully contribute to and advance within the armed forces.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the historical exclusion of women from military roles has gradually evolved into a more inclusive approach in many European countries, though challenges to full integration persist. While women's roles within the armed forces have expanded significantly since World War I, their participation has been often met with systematic resistance that has been shaped by traditional gender norms and biases. As society has progressed, policies and legal frameworks have improved in order to promote women's involvement in both leadership and combat positions. Countries like Sweden and Norway have led the way in advancing gender equality through gender neutral conscription and increased representation and legal reforms. However, despite this progress, significant obstacles remain.

Women continue to face issues such as gender discrimination, harassment and unequal access to leadership positions, all of which reflect deeper cultural biases that legislation alone cannot remedy. Additionally, the unique psychological and physical challenges faced by women in the military — ranging from balancing service with family life to combating sexual harassment — further highlight the complexities of achieving genuine equality.

Although the integration of women into the military represents a crucial step toward gender equality and social progress, more work remains to be made in order to create an environment where women are seen as equal contributors. The persistence of gender biases, underrepresentation in leadership and fostering of inclusive military cultures are necessary in realising the full potential of gender integration in the armed forces. Ultimately, the quest for true equality requires not only legal adjustments, but also a fundamental shift in the way that women are viewed and valued within military institutions.

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