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**WHERE ARE THE WOMEN? HEGEMONIC
MASCULINITY AND THE STRUGGLE
FOR THE INTEGRATION OF WOMEN
INTO THE MILITARY**

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Introduction

In November 2024, the German Ministry of Defence (BMVG) presented its newest recruitment strategy for the Bundeswehr. The law, dubbed "Der Neue Wehrdienst" (New Defence Service), entails a QR code containing a survey sent to all citizens of age (BMVG, 2024). This survey asks about citizens' willingness and competences to join the military for a minimum of six months, which can be extended to up to 23 months (Aßmann, 2024; BMVG, 2024). While the law itself can be seen as a promising method of recruiting more soldiers and making the institution more fit for states of emergency, one particular feature raises sincere questions about the composition and future structure of the military, namely that the survey is only compulsory for men.

According to Germany's public broadcaster Allgemeiner Rundfunk Deutschland (ARD), the reasoning behind this decision is that changing the German Basic Law to make the survey compulsory for women would likely be necessary otherwise, an "undertaking the German government currently does not want to address" (Aßmann, 2024). [1] While such an endeavour takes political coherency that the German government did not possess at this point in time, and will not at least until after the election in February, it highlights a central truth that besets modern militaries: the military is made out to be a man's sphere first, and anyone else is at best welcome to join along. This in itself is an issue, especially in societies that proclaim to strive for gender equality, but it becomes increasingly relevant in light of new security concerns related to Russia's War on Ukraine. If, as the BMVG (2024) describes it, "the massively intensified threat" [2] caused by Russia's aggression would escalate into a great-scale war, how quickly would national militaries revert to notions of masculinised honour and valour, in which women are actively discouraged from military service?

The issue of recruiting women into national militaries in the context of modernising and improving European militaries as a response to Russia's war is an important question in contemporary Civil-Military relations. It is this thematic concern that this research will consider in regards to the integration of women into militaries. It will make the case that the military as an institution relies on a hegemonic masculinity that reinforces a highly gendered configuration of its institutional structures. As long as this holds, women are discouraged from joining the military and cannot be wholly integrated, which has significant implications for the future of militaries should grand-scale conflict break out. To this end, this piece is divided into two sections. The first will discuss the hegemonic masculinity of military structures from a theoretical angle, which will be used as the foundation for the practical dimensions of the structural issues behind recruiting and integrating women in Section 2.

[1] This is my own translation. German original: "Dieses Vorhaben will die Bundesregierung momentan nicht angehen."

[2] This is my own translation. German original: "Massiv verschärfte Bedrohungslage"

1. The Military and its Hegemonic Masculinity

Women have become increasingly important for militaries since the human security framework took hold in the international system in the wake of the Cold War and the humanitarian crises in the Congo and the Balkans in the 1990s. This framework has shifted the predominant role of militaries towards an organisational framework commonly described as "cosmopolitan", which centres on the defence of human life rather than that of sovereign borders (Annan, 1999; Gilmore, 2015). Despite the increasing importance and necessity of female participation within this framework, militaries remain a male-dominated space. This section strives to highlight how the military as an institution is constructed in a way that makes it difficult for women to be wholly integrated within its structures. Making the case that national militaries function based on hegemonic masculinity embedded within its institutional structures, the argument first outlines how masculinity is hegemonically constructed in military institutions before discussing its implications on the construction of femininity and, finally, how this plays out relationally. This will create a solid theoretical foundation for the practical focus of the second section of this research.

To understand the underlying issues of integrating women into militaries, it is important to understand how the military functions as an institution. Despite continuous efforts, as well as the increasing necessity, to integrate women into the military, military institutions are run on a hegemonic notion of masculinity that makes it fundamentally more difficult to make gender configurations equal. In her seminal text *Masculinities*, R. W. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer of the legitimacy of patriarchy", leading to "one form of masculinity" being "culturally exalted" (2005, p. 77). This idea of 'configuration' is easily detectable in military structures, where "masculinity is not about gender—it is the norm" (Kronsell 2012, p. 46). Recruitment posters like those of the USA in 1917, proclaiming that 'The United States Army builds MEN' point to the construction of a certain imagery that defines masculinity and ties it directly to the institution itself (Connell 2005, p. 213). Efforts such as these make an inherent connection between a normative masculinity and a military in which a man is considered to be a heroic protector. These visions serve as a way to normatively reinforce the specific demands of the role of a soldier and how masculinity should function as a result. The hegemonic masculinity of military structures serves as "the essential glue" that ties men ideationally to the institution itself (Kronsell 2012, p. 23).

If a masculine ideal holds together the structure of the military itself, it creates a realm for the function of femininity in security and defence of the nation as a whole. Whereas masculinity personifies the soldier's defence of the nation, women are fit within a rubric in which their nurturing femininity equates them with motherhood. While the male soldiers

the nation in armed combat, women and femininity are used as symbols of the vulnerability that the male soldier protects. Cynthia Enloe captures this contrast by highlighting that women have symbolised "the nation violated, the nation suffering, the nation reproducing itself, the nation at its purest", but essentially never as a real participant (2014, p. 87). In the security landscape, womanhood is essentialised; their biology is made destiny (Otto 2003, p. 108). This has the adverse effect of women being inseparable from this 'function' and placed, especially in peacekeeping, into an indistinguishable rubric of "women and children" (Enloe, 2014, p. 1). Within the institution of the military, it is therefore important to consider just how hegemonic masculinity impacts not only the male soldier but also what it purports for those who do not fit within this frame. For women and femininity at large, it has meant to be excluded from the soldiering sphere wholly.

It is important to consider how these configurations play out together. Viewing the interactions between masculinity and femininity helps understand why incorporating women into the military has failed thus far. In Connell's terms, the way this masculinity takes shape and is 'exalted' is of central importance here. While women have become increasingly involved in the military in recent decades, there is no doubt that it is still a masculinised institution in cultural memory and how it is framed institutionally (Connell, 2000, p. 215). This is not achieved through actively forbidding women from the military but through institutionally reinforcing that the military is a man's station. In the simple sense that "the ultimate test of a man's masculinity" lies in combat, it is this masculinity that is valorised as something to strive for (Duncanson, 2015, pp. 238, 242). This comes at the cost that femininity, and any other gender configuration falling outside valorised masculinity is associated with weakness and passivity (Duncanson, 2015, p. 241). Masculinity and femininity stand in relation to one another in such a way that the former is rendered as the "neutral" configuration of gender, while the latter is 'othered' (Kronsell 2012, p. 29). This configuration makes it difficult to integrate women into the military.

This section has examined how hegemonic masculinity is embedded within military structures, how it shapes perceptions of femininity, and how these gender constructs interact. The important takeaway is that in the military, gender is institutionalised by practices that are produced in the interactions that reproduce the patterns of power between men and women, masculinity and femininity (Connell, 1987, pp. 168, 234). Through establishing what it means to be a soldier on the terms of masculinity, women are actively made to feel out of place on the grounds of them not being able to achieve this desired state. In the following section, this research will analyse these findings on a practical level and establish its implications on the current military landscape.

2. The Practical Dimensions of Hegemonic Masculinity and its Contemporary Implications

Returning briefly to the case of Germany, it has become evident that women are increasingly important as a human resource pool since the suspension of military conscription in 2011 and the turn towards an all-volunteer force (Graf & Kuemmel, 2022, p. 937). This condition holds for all Western democracies that have turned away from conscription and have witnessed the difficulties of retaining personnel on a volunteer basis, further stressing the need to integrate women. At a time when manpower shortages are a very real worry of European armies, engrained hegemonically masculine structures are one of the main reasons why militaries fail to attract personnel. Building on Timo A. Graf's and Gerhard Kuemmel's argument that women's perception of the realisation of gender equality in the military may be "the Achilles heel of recruiting women" (2022, p. 938), this section highlights how the practical dimensions of hegemonic masculinity make gender-equal militaries an impossibility as well as structurally weakening efforts to gain more recruits.

The aforementioned German example signifies how hegemonic masculinity is reinforced in military structures. This is especially apparent in the symbolism of recruitment, in which women joining the military are viewed not as an integral part of the military structure but an added facet of the military's composition. Annica Kronsell (2012) elaborates on this condition, arguing that the rhetoric around the principle of women-in-arms signifies that women represent an auxiliary force to the dominant and masculinised vision of the soldier. Kronsell argues, in the context of Sweden, that femininity in the military is often described as a negation, which leads to female soldiers having to "manage" (2012, p. 51) their femininity based on this masculinised vision.

She exemplifies this condition through a closer analysis of 'The Nordic Battlegroup 2008' and Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) recruitment strategies. Referencing a recruitment pamphlet, she alludes to the lack of women depicted in action-oriented scenarios, highlighting the usage of two pictures depicting traditional feminine tasks, assisting on an operating table and sewing the insignia of the Nordic Battlegroup on a flag (Kronsell 2012, pp. 124-125). Her example of the SAF pamphlet describes how a norm of the masculinised soldier emerges and how, if women want to be active soldiers, they are required to adjust to that imagery. The case of the SAF highlights how, even in 'cosmopolitanised' militaries, hegemonic structures of masculinity emblematised the military as an institution and the hardships it creates for women to be fully integrated into these structures. If the military continues to rest upon these specific symbolisms, it will continue to mainly attract a limited and narrow target group.

This leads to a condition in which interactions within the military are targeted towards this norm, which adversely affects how women experience the military and how they are received in these masculinised structures. The standard results of a constructed norm of masculinity are given in a 2015 study conducted in the U.S. that highlights that "military women are underrepresented in research ... that examine their unique health care needs." (Braun & Sadler, 2015, p. 1247). Lisa A. Braun and Lois S. Sadler argue in their research that for the recruitment and retention of women in the military, strategies addressing concerns of underrepresented and marginalised populations must be taken into account, which will hardly be possible if the military continues to run on masculinised norms (2015, p. 1254). The point highlights the necessity to make the military more attractive and to make the institution a place where diverse needs are met independently.

These elements limiting the development of the military as an equal sphere are equally met by male resistance to the inclusion of women into a masculinised sphere, signifying how the military continues to be embraced as a solely male space. In his important study after the full legal integration of women into the German military, Kuemmel (2002) noted the ambivalence of male soldiers to the full legal integration of women and highlighted how general acceptance blended with typical fears of female integration and feminist goals. The results of his study "indicated a persistence of traditional images concerning the role of women", and the conclusions Kuemmel drew were that many male soldiers feared reverse discrimination, an anticipation of a changing tone in the military in general and an increase in problems related to sexuality (Kuemmel, 2002, p. 563). Additionally, soldiers adhered to typical perceptions of the roles women should take in the military, the 'protected' and the 'communicator' (Kuemmel, 2002, p. 563). While these fears have generally faded, Kuemmel reiterated these points made in his 2022 study with Graf, which points to a persistent, active way in which masculinised visions make the full integration of women into the military more difficult and have limited the potential for men to take up more diverse roles than valorous protectors.

Beyond these institutional facets, these visions play out privately in the institutions' relations between the dominant form of masculinity and any other form of gender configuration, predominantly female. A 2015 study on why women join the military found that several participants of the study had left the military prematurely after initially deciding to remain in the military for their career as a result of sexual and gender harassment (Mankowski et al., 2015, p. 321). This matches similar research that has found that, in the U.S., 38.4% of female military personnel and veterans reported military sexual trauma (MST) compared to 3.9% of men or that Gender and Sexual minorities in Portugal continue to be affected by a "hypermasculine, sexist, and heteronormative" military culture (Wilson, 2018, p. 592; Azevedo & Pereira, 2025, p. 329). Dominating forms of masculinity, which in part are encouraged by

hypermasculine structures, therefore reinforce a structure in which different gender configurations are actively discouraged, which shapes an environment in which women, sexual minorities, and soldiers not adhering to these gender configurations will feel left out, and are even likelier to feel discouraged from being part of the military, or are actively pushed out on the basis of the environment in which these relations play. It will require active work to root out these configurations, which inherently obstruct recruitment objectives.

These practical dimensions showcase how the relationships, symbolism and actions within the institution of the military, embodied by hegemonically masculine structures, fundamentally complicate the integration of women and wider recruitment. International examples reaching from Germany to Sweden, the U.S., and Portugal underscore that a dominant relationship between the norm of masculinity and femininity is constitutive of military conditions. The task of making European militaries fit for the worst-case scenario of war requires not only an increase in the money spent on equipment, PR strategies, and recruitment ads but also reconfiguring the military to make it a viable space for any citizen to serve their country, as well as to develop important life skills. The full integration of women and the deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity within the military must be viewed as a critical Civil-Military issue. Europe desperately needs recruits for the worst-case scenario of war, and women's integration and the deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity will become an important aspect of maintaining the liberal character of nations and militaries. Cynthia Enloe argues that the "absorption of the idea that we live in a dangerous world serves to reinforce the primacy of particular forms of masculinity while subordinating women and femininity itself" (2014, p. 30). The likelihood of this happening in the event of war, both in a military and broader societal context, in light of the current configuration of gender in militaries seems high. Integrating women into military structures must remain a pressing issue to ensure that the future of militaries and societies will be constructed equally.

Conclusions

This piece has looked at the continuous struggle to integrate women within the institution of the military, tracing the struggle to the hegemonic masculinity embedded within the same structures that compose it. Using the newest strategy of the Bundeswehr to gain more recruits as a point of departure, the text began by establishing, on a theoretical basis, how hegemonic masculinity takes shape. These hegemonic structures make it intrinsically difficult for women to be integrated into the military, an argument that was expanded on in the second section through a practical discussion of how this takes form in the practical dimensions of military life. Analysing how masculinity takes shape in symbolism, recruitment, male fears, and, importantly, discrimination and exclusion, Section 2 highlighted the key

components of the issue. The final part of this research then highlighted the importance of this issue in a contemporary context, stressing that a continuous effort to integrate women within the military is vital for its future. It is therefore necessary to recognise the hegemonic masculinity in the military and to perceive the adverse and lasting effect it has on the integration of women and the composition of the military in general. Future recruitment strategies and the development of militaries generally must take this dimension into account.

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