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THE IMPACT OF POLICIES ON GENDER INTEGRATION IN THE ARMED FORCES

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Introduction

The situation of women in the armed forces of western democracies has been changing during the past four decades. By the beginning of the XXI century, all NATO countries had admitted and increased the number of women in their Armed Forces; many restrictions were lifted; women were progressively allowed to enter military academies and given access to a wider variety of positions and functions; gender awareness grew within most military structures and integration policies were designed and implemented.

However, full integration has not been achieved yet. As in so many areas of social life, women are still occupying not very honorable positions in official statistics. Despite the above-mentioned tendency to eliminate discrimination and equalize status between service members, occupational restrictions still exist and women are largely excluded from many combat related areas and functions. They have limited representation in power positions within the military system, are not always readily accepted, and often have to face hostile reactions. Empirical data show that even when formal/legal integration has been accomplished, effective social integration has not necessarily followed (Winslow and Dunn, 2002). In addition, progress made in the past has not always shown a linear pattern. Women's military participation has been subject to cycles of expansion and contraction (Segal, 1999), and tendencies to reinstate exclusionary policies have been observed.

Diversity between countries is also clear: while some have integrated women, granting them real (and not only formal) access to a wide range of positions and occupations, other keep women in little more than symbolic spaces.

So we must ask the questions: why does this happen? What factors explain such diversity?

Among the variety of factors which account for different paths and integration levels – which range from global social-economic conditions, political factors, cultural and historical patterns, military organizational structure or time effects - there are institutional policies. It is true that the existence or absence of gender-related policies, as much as their form and content, is already the result of both external determinants and military internal orientations; still, one rather common assumption is that explicit organizational policies are a crucial factor to promote integration at the organizational level.

However, some studies have also reached disappointing conclusions regarding the power of institutional policies to help redress culturally entrenched stereotypes that often function as obstacles to integration.

In this presentation I would like to discuss the impact of organizational policies on gender integration using available empirical data from a comparative study I conducted among NATO nations a few years ago (Carreiras, 2006).

I specifically address the following questions:

- What is the impact of organizational policies on gender integration?

- To what extent does the existence of explicit and active integration policies contribute to promote equality in military forces?

- Under which conditions are policies effective and under which conditions may their effects be blocked?

The effect of policies on gender integration in the armed forces

As mentioned, the various NATO nations score differently on gender integration. An index of gender inclusiveness, built in the frame of the above referred study, gives a clear picture of this situation.

Slide 1 - Index of Gender Inclusiveness in the Armed Forces
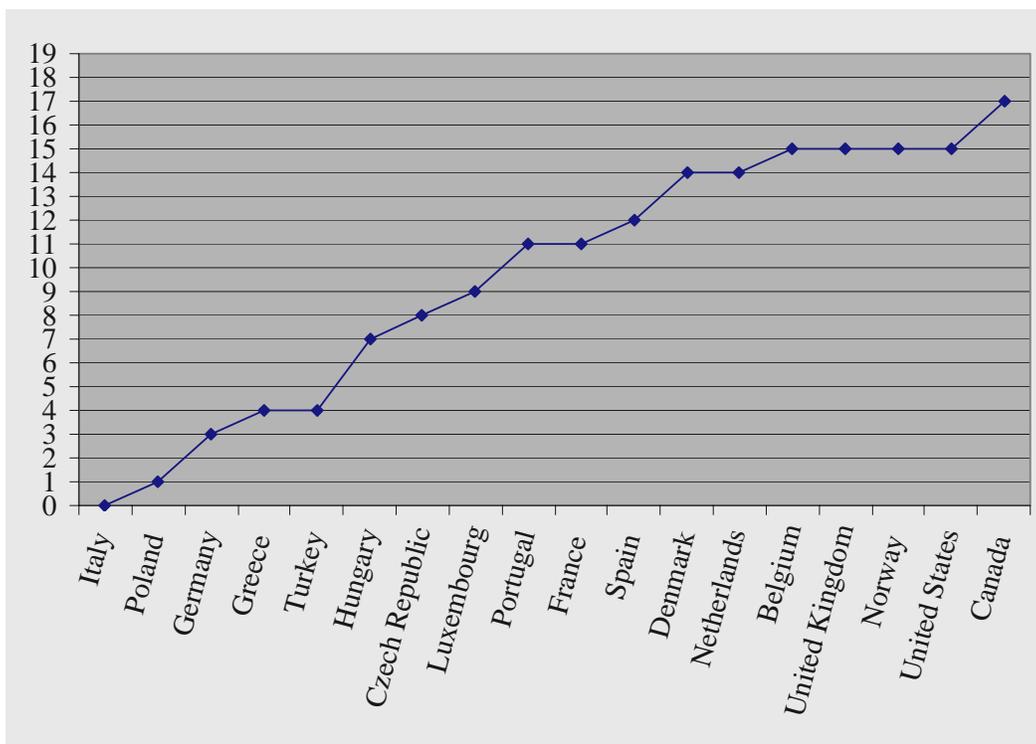
Source: Carreiras (2006)

A variety of factors were identified to explain it.

On the one hand, gender integration in the Armed Forces clearly reached higher levels in countries more exposed to the democratization of gender relations in society at large and to external political pressures to achieve gender equality in the military; where the military opened up to society due to organizational shifts towards professionalization; and where gender equality policies had been implemented in the armed forces.

On the other hand, and regardless of the moment when women joined, in countries where those external influences had not been felt with the same intensity, where the military remained closer to a mass-army format; where women had not reached a 'qualified' position in the social structure; and where no active integration policies had been pursued, there were lower levels of gender inclusiveness in the military.

Given these results, I hypothesized that change towards greater gender equality in the armed forces would not occur automatically as a consequence of time or the increase in relative numbers. It would probably depend much more on the extent to which both organizational changes and external variables, such as women's 'controlling' presence in society at large, or political pressures, would determine policy orientations and decision-making processes within the armed forces.

Somehow, then, my conclusion was that policies could be seen as important factors to promote gender integration.

However, a closer look at specific cases –Portugal and the Netherlands - although confirming this hypothesis, introduced interesting 'nuances' and showed that the causal process may be more complicated, especially when it comes to evaluating the impact of policies.

Portugal and the Netherlands have a different performance in terms of gender integration. Portugal presents a more segregated pattern in terms of service and occupational distributions, with a much lower representation of women in operational functions. Comparatively, the Netherlands has a much more balanced distribution of women in the various branches and within the occupational structure. While in the former country the process of women's recruitment has been marked by a dominantly instrumental approach, consistent with a general lack of policies, the Netherlands has, from the very beginning, issued plans of affirmative action which developed into active policies aiming at managing diversity in the armed forces.

Notwithstanding the different policy approaches, the two countries showed an unexpected tendency to converge in some aspects where one might have expected major differences: relative numbers and hierarchical distribution. Having started ten years later,

Portugal performed better than expected, showing a surprising tendency to accelerate integration, even if only in the formal dimensions of inclusiveness. A few indicators were surprisingly positive, considering both the absence of policies and a more 'institutionally' oriented military: representation of women has grown rapidly, formal restrictions have been eliminated in a short period of time, and the number of women applying for a military career is still high. The absence of policies does not seem to have affected formal integration –at least thus far.

Contrarily, the Netherlands performed worse than might be expected, considering the efforts to promote equality at the global governmental and military levels, and the prevalence of a clearly more civilian oriented, 'postmodern' military structure. Not only did women not feel attracted by the military, but attrition prevented them from reaching higher hierarchical levels. Due to the existence of a more competitive opportunity structure for women in society at large, earlier progress in gender integration in the armed forces had not been easily sustained. The existence of policies, which determined a more positive climate regarding the integration of women, did not seem to be sufficient to keep them in the forces.

To what extent can these results make us rethink the conclusion regarding the impact of policies, or at least reconsider the conditions under which their efficacy might be blocked?

A possible answer to this question came from the analysis of interviews with men and women officers in the two countries. It helped solve the puzzle by shedding light on how cultural values concerning gender relations and the social roles of women may limit the supposedly positive effects of policies, thus functioning as countervailing forces in the process of gender integration in the military.

Throughout the interviews, both men and women made puzzling references to the impact of policies (especially in the Netherlands, where those policies actually exist). There was not only a general tendency to minimize the importance of several policy measures, but some of them were even looked at with suspicion. This was true of the following specific issues:

a) a strong resentment against positive discrimination,

b) perceptions of inequity derived from different physical requirements,

c) the ambivalent evaluation of part-time measures,

d) resistance to women mentors,

e) devaluation of the importance of courses aimed at promoting gender equality, etc.

These references suggest a disturbing possibility as far as the evaluation of organizational policies and programs is concerned: that the efficacy of policies will be limited by the way in which individuals

interpret them; or more, that policies aiming at formal integration may turn out to work against social integration. Cultural values regarding masculinity and femininity as well as those concerning women's social roles can work as obstacles in the process of gender integration, even when all other conditions are favorable.

Discussion and conclusion

If military men feel overly pressured by institutional policies or these are interpreted by both men and women as sources of inequity, blatant resistance to women's integration "may fade only to be replaced by more subtle, covert forms of discrimination and hostility" (Yoder, Adam and Prince, 1983: 334). **Organizational policies that discourage negative behaviors against military women may not be as vital as some have supposed for the failure or success of the integration process.**

In fact, research suggests that polices may be a necessary but not sufficient condition for integration – that their impact, while positive on formal integration, may not always be so on social integration - and that conditions for change do not depend strictly on formal policies. Greater gender inclusiveness will probably depend more on change regarding women's 'controlling' presence in society, its impact on cultural conceptions of gender relations and on a more balanced distribution of domestic and paid work between the sexes, than on formal organizational policies.

How should we interpret this? That policies are not important? That we should not care about conceiving, implementing and monitoring policies? That is not my answer.

First of all, the idea that policies may be a necessary but not sufficient condition to ensure the sustainability of the process of gender integration in the military, calls for **further research** (specifically designed to evaluate the impact of policies on integration).

Secondly, it seems to coincide with those perspectives that stress the limits of formal policies in fostering cultural change (Katzenstein and Reppy, 1999), but which also stress that the real problem is the clash between aspects of military culture that promote intolerance and official policies on gender integration, **not necessarily the lack or inadequacy of policies.**

Thirdly, the existence of contradictory findings, that is, accounts of situations where institutional policy seemed to help change negative attitudes of male soldiers towards women (Yoder, Adams and Prince, 1983; Rosen et. al., 1996), warns against linear conclusions. It suggests instead the need to **analyze the conditions under which the efficacy of policies may vary,** considering both external variables (e.g. institutional anchorage; articulation or conflict with policies of other gender regimes) and internal features (flexibility

vs. rigidity, stability vs. volatility, coherence, coordination, forms of implementation and control).

From my point of view, as crucial as proposing and implementing policies in this area, is to ensure that those policies will not clash with military men and women's values and orientations, or at least (since some 'clash' may be unavoidable) that they are widely accepted and understood. If they do not, results will probably be irrelevant if not detrimental to gender integration.

My presentation may sound somehow disappointing as far as the possibility of using policies to eliminating obstacles to gender integration in the military is concerned. However, let me conclude with a positive note: there is no reason to believe that equality will be achieved or perceptions will be changed in the absence of formal equality and fair representation. And at least in this respect – of building formal equality -, policies are fundamental. If reaching objective positions in the social structure does not guarantee equality (is not a sufficient condition for), not reaching them will certainly ensure the reproduction of inequality.

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Carreiras, Helena / Kümmel, Gerhard - **Women in the Military and in Armed Conflict**, **ISBN:** 978-3-531-15834-1 - The debate about the role of women in war, violent conflict and the military is not only a long and ongoing one; it is also a heated and controversial one. The contributions to this anthology come from experts in the field who approach the topic from various angles thus offering different and, at times, diverging perspectives. The reader will therefore gain in-depth insight into the most important aspects and positions in the debate.

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