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**FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**

Institute of Political Studies  
Department of International Relations

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**FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**

Institute of Political Studies  
Department of International Relations

**(Gender-Neutral) Conscription in the Nordic  
Countries' Armed Forces**

Bachelor's Thesis

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Year of defence: 2023

## **Declaration**

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on 30.6. 2023

Štěpánka Šťastníková

## **References**

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## **Abstract**

While conscription has been experiencing a modest, albeit notable comeback in the past decade, the emergence of its gender-neutral variant is largely overlooked. Through a comparative case study of Norway, Sweden, and Finland, this thesis explores the reasons that led to or hindered the introduction of gender-neutral conscription in the three Nordic countries. Given the countries' similarities in many areas, the thesis aims to explain why Norway and Sweden introduced gender-neutral conscription, whereas Finland retained conscription only for men. To do that, the three cases are analysed using an original framework based on the surveyed literature, which features the following factors: national security situation, role and character of conscription, its legitimisation, integration of women into the military and thematization of gender equality in the military. On the one hand, the analysis identifies common patterns in the cases of Norway and Sweden across most of the factors. In the two countries, the security situation was perceived to be relatively favourable, conscription was used as a tool for the recruitment of future active-duty soldiers and thus the practice was considerably selective, conscription was reformulated to address changing circumstances, women were integrated into the military early, and gender inequality in the AFs was perceived as a problem. In Finland, on the other hand, Russia has been perceived as a somewhat of a threat, the objective of conscription is to train as many people as possible, conscription is legitimised on the same grounds as before, women were allowed into the military comparatively later, and gender equality in the military is not considered a priority.

## **Abstrakt**

Zatímco povinná vojenská služba (PVS) zažívá v posledním desetiletí mírný, ale pozoruhodný návrat, vznik její genderově neutrální varianty byl značně přehlížen. Táto práce prostřednictvím komparativní případové studie Norska, Švédska a Finska zkoumá důvody, které vedly k, nebo naopak bránily zavedení genderově-neutrální PVS. Vzhledem podobnostem těchto zemí v mnoha oblastech se práce snaží vysvětlit, proč Norsko a Švédsko zavedly genderově neutrální PVS, zatímco Finsko zachovalo PVS pouze pro muže. Za tímto účelem jsou tyto tři případy analyzovány pomocí originálního rámce založeného na existující literatuře, který obsahuje následující faktory: bezpečnostní situace země, role a charakter PVS, její legitimizace, integrace žen do armády a tematizace genderové rovnosti v armádě. V případě Norska a Švédska analýza ve většině faktorů identifikuje shodné vzorce. V obou zemích byla bezpečnostní situace vnímána jako relativně příznivá, PVS byla využívána jako nástroj pro rekrutaci budoucích vojáků\*yn z povolání, a proto byla tato praxe značně selektivní, PVS byla přeformulována v reakci na měnící se okolnosti, ženy byly do armády integrovány brzy a genderová nerovnost v armádě byla vnímána jako problém. Naproti tomu ve Finsku bylo Rusko vnímáno jako určitá hrozba, PVS byla formulována na stejném základě jako dříve, ženám bylo dovoleno vstoupit do armády komparativně později a genderová rovnost v armádě nebyla nutně považována za prioritu.

## **Keywords**

conscription, gender-neutral conscription, armed forces, civil-military relations, Nordic countries

## **Klíčová slova**

povinná vojenská služba, genderově neutrální povinná vojenská služba, ozbrojené síly, civilně-vojenské vztahy, severské země

## **Title**

(Gender-Neutral) Conscription in the Nordic Countries' Armed Forces

## **Název práce**

(Genderově neutrální) povinná vojenská služba v ozbrojených silách severských zemí

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Topic and Its Significance

Conscription was, after the end of the Cold War, widely seen as something outdated as many countries downscaled and professionalised their militaries as well as reoriented their focus towards international deployment. However, with territorial defence once again becoming a priority of many European militaries, some countries are turning back to conscription in order to ensure the proper operational capability of their armed forces. A remarkable new phenomenon emerged in 2015 when Norway as the first country in the world actively implemented gender-neutral conscription, that is the conscription of men and women for military service on the exact same terms. Sweden followed suit three years later when it reintroduced conscription in a gender-neutral form. Based on this, it might seem that gender-neutral conscription is a distinctively Nordic phenomenon. However, when examining other countries of the region, it is evident that this is not the case – Finland, for instance, has maintained conscription only for men. Given that the Nordic countries share distinct political, societal, as well as cultural characteristics, one might wonder about the explanation for this difference of outcomes.

It will thus be the primary aim of this thesis to explore this puzzle by answering the following research question: *What factors can explain the differences in the (non)introduction of gender-neutral conscription in the three Nordic countries?* In other words, the thesis will seek to examine the underlying factors that led to the introduction of gender-neutral conscription in Norway and Sweden and, on the other hand, those factors that prevented its introduction in Finland.

The reason for choosing the topic of gender-neutral conscription is that it is a new and in academic literature understudied phenomenon which, however, has vast potential for several reasons. First, the modest resurgence of conscription in Europe since 2014 shows that it can still represent a viable practice. This is especially the case in the Nordic countries where conscription has a long and distinct tradition. However, the legitimisation of conscription, and especially of its male-only variant, has been increasingly difficult all over Europe. Gender-neutral conscription has arguably the potential to provide a new, 21<sup>st</sup>-century model of addressing the recruitment needs of the armed forces as well as

maintaining a connection between the military and its parent society (Braw, 2019; Strand, 2021, 2023). Finally, from a scholarly point of view, female conscription relates to a wider debate about the integration of women and minorities into the armed forces, which is a topical question of contemporary civil-military relations.

## **1.2 Method, Case Selection, and Structure**

Methodologically, this thesis will be a comparative case study of Norway, Sweden, and Finland<sup>1</sup>. To conduct the comparison, the thesis will follow an original framework that identifies underlying factors that can explain the differences in the (non)introduction of gender-neutral conscription and will apply it to the three cases. The aim will be to focus on particular factors that the surveyed literature as well as preliminary analysis deemed important for the explanation of the presence or the absence of gender-neutral conscription, rather than to provide a comprehensive description of the state of affairs. The research itself will be based on qualitative analysis of a wide range of primary as well as secondary sources.

The cases were selected on the basis of their similarity in general characteristics – the political, societal, and cultural contexts of the three countries are very much alike. Importantly for this thesis, they have, for example, some of the highest levels of gender equality in the entire world (Heikkilä & Laukkanen, 2022). Moreover, another common feature which is relevant to their conception of defence is that Norway, Sweden, and Finland have vast territories with very low population density and are located in close proximity to Russia, the main regional threat. As a result of these factors, the three countries have all maintained a total defence approach (Wither, 2020). While it would have been better to select cases on the basis of Mill's methods of agreement and difference (Van Evera, 1997, p. 68), in reality, it was not possible to find a suitable group of cases as very few European countries use conscription.

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<sup>1</sup> The original thesis proposal also featured Denmark as a fourth case. However, I decided not to include it because, at the time of writing, the future of the form of conscription in Denmark was uncertain as in January 2023 Danish defence minister proposed to make conscription gender-neutral (Wienberg & Schwartzkopff, 2023). This way, the exclusion of Denmark will enable me to avoid confusion and conduct a more thorough analysis of the three cases.

With regards to the structure of the thesis, the following section will review the literature that is relevant to the understanding of the reasons behind the (non)introduction of gender-neutral conscription. It will summarise extant literature devoted to the phenomenon of conscription, the topic of women in the military and finally to female conscription. Based on the surveyed literature, an analytical framework that is instrumental for answering the research question will be introduced. In the empirical-analytical section, the cases of Norway, Sweden, and Finland will be analysed using this framework. The final part of the thesis will then summarise, compare, and discuss the main findings.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Conscription**

#### **2.1.1 Conscription in Historical Perspective**

Although its roots go back much deeper into the past, conscription in its modern form is usually traced back to the Napoleonic wars. Since then, it had been the dominant recruitment practice of the Western armed forces up until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Conscription was inextricably linked to the phenomenon of the mass army, as it enabled vast numbers of men to be recruited and to consequently form large-scale armies (van Doorn, 1975). However, starting in the 1960s, armed forces began to reduce their military manpower by loosening conscription policies or abandoning conscription altogether which resulted in the decline of the mass army. To explain this change, Janowitz (1972) noted that technological advancements as well as societal changes were important factors in pushing the armed forces to rely more on volunteers rather than conscripts. Indeed, socio-cultural changes led young people to question the legitimacy of compulsory military service, as they placed more emphasis on personal liberties and promoted the idea of pacifism.

The definite turning point for conscription, however, came with the end of the Cold War which, by profoundly changing the geopolitical environment, invigorated the above-mentioned processes within the militaries as well as precipitated new ones. As the perceived conventional threat diminished, the need for large standing armies consisting of conscripts whose central task was territorial defence virtually disappeared (Dandeker, 1994). The end of the Cold War also altered if not the nature of armed conflicts, then at least the character of Western militaries' participation in them. For the past thirty years, the dominant task of contemporary armed forces has been to deal with subnational threats in fragile, conflict-ridden regions which are of interest (Manigart, 2018, p. 414). Armed forces thus took on different and much more complex tasks such as counter-terrorist operations, humanitarian interventions, or peacekeeping. The changed nature of missions has naturally affected the requirements for both soldiers and entire militaries. For this new environment, smaller, readily-deployable, and highly-trained forces rather than large numbers of conscripts are more suitable (Haltiner & Tresch, 2008). As conscripts usually

cannot be sent abroad against their will but must be contracted, their use in these new conditions is rather limited.

Even during the Cold War, conscripts were often utilized for non-specialized tasks, this tendency has, however, grown with the advancement of military technology. In the past few decades, increasingly more sophisticated technologies have been introduced, a phenomenon often referred to as the “revolution in military affairs” (Cohen, 2004). This has consequently placed a greater emphasis on personnel expertise, effectively to a large degree limiting the utility of conscripts because of their lack of thorough training.

“New” types of threats, advanced technologies, and socio-political shifts all lead to the major transformation of Western armed forces, giving rise to what is often called the “postmodern military” (Moskos, 2000). This restructuring process has mostly been characterized by the downsizing and professionalization of militaries, as well as their multinationalisation (Manigart, 2018, pp. 414–421). Thus, by gradually phasing out the draft, most European countries shifted from conscription-based armed forces to all-volunteer ones (AVFs) which are significantly smaller, flexible, and formed entirely by professional soldiers. Moreover, Western militaries have become increasingly integrated into the multinational structures of NATO. However, as several cases in which conscription was retained (Finland, Norway, or Estonia among others) demonstrate, military service has not become completely irrelevant, only the reasons for it are now complex and diverge case by case.

Russia’s aggressive behaviour towards Ukraine, which culminated in a full-scale invasion in 2022, has dramatically changed the security environment in Europe. With the Russian attack on Ukraine and nuclear threats accompanying it, the possibility of an all-out conventional war has arguably returned to NATO’s strategic calculus. It was precisely Russian belligerence since 2014 together with considerable shortages of volunteers for the military that have led to the modest, albeit notable revival of conscription (Bieri, 2015; *The Economist*, 2021). The draft was reinstated in Ukraine, Sweden, Latvia, and Lithuania. This smaller resurgence shows that, while conscription is today not suitable for every context, it can still be successfully applicable as it is able to evolve over time and co-exist with other recruiting practices (Kosnik, 2017).

### 2.1.2 Classifying Conscription

One of the ways of classifying conscription is by looking at the proportion of the force constituted by conscripts. This tells us how significant a role conscription plays within the particular military. In this respect, Haltiner's (1998) typology of force structure provides an illuminating framework. With conscription being tightly intertwined with force structure, it only makes sense to examine them in relation to each other. The typology identifies four force structures according to divergent conscript ratios (CR), that is the percentage of conscripts compared to regulars.

- Type 0 (all-volunteer force) – no conscription
- Type I (pseudo-conscript force) – CR below 50%
- Type III (soft-core conscript force) – CR between 50% and 66%
- Type IV (hard-core conscript force) – CR above 66%

Most importantly, Haltiner (1998) shows that force structure cannot be viewed in binary terms as either conscription-based or all-volunteer, but that a more nuanced perspective is needed. Although the pseudo-conscript forces “may rely principally on universal conscription”, they mostly consist of volunteers (Haltiner, 1998). Thus, their structure de facto resembles an AVF rather than a conscript-based military.

Additionally, the practice of conscription can be very broadly divided as either universal or selective. In the traditional sense, universal conscription refers to the enlistment of, with some exceptions, all young men from a particular age cohort. (Nowadays, the term universal conscription is sometimes used to talk about the drafting of both men and women, however, for the sake of clarity, the term gender-neutral conscription will be used for that in this thesis.) On the other hand, selective conscription refers to the enlistment of only a smaller portion of people based on a particular filtering criterion. Specifically in relation to Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, Braw (2019) calls this type of practice “competitive national service” to highlight the fact that selected recruits are highly motivated and capable.

A completely different approach to categorizing conscription was provided by Sorensen (2000) who in his analysis of Nordic countries focused on the role that conscripts play within the armed forces. In his “DDD model”, he distinguished three ideal reasons for the use of conscripts – democracy, deterrence, and deployment (Sorensen, 2000). Democracy

refers to the strengthening of civil-military relations as well as socializing the youth, deterrence to discouraging a military attack, and, finally, deployment pertains to the use of conscripts in missions abroad.

### **2.1.3 Determinants of Conscription**

Rather than being influenced by one dominant factor, the particular recruitment policy is determined by a multitude of intertwined variables ranging from security, political, societal, and economic ones. The first and perhaps the most straightforward factor that generally increases the probability of the use of conscription are high levels of external threats to national security (Asal et al., 2017). According to Cohen (1985, p. 25), “the length of its land borders with potentially hostile neighbours and the size of its population relative to that of its neighbour” in particular are reliable predictors of a country’s recruitment policy. Thus, mass conscription can serve both as a tool of deterrence or, in the case of deterrence failure, as a potent source of manpower. However, it must be noted that several cases can be found when countries relied on volunteers in the presence of a dire threat and, conversely, employed conscription in the absence of it.

Another often-discussed issue has been the link between democracy and conscription. Traditionally, democracy and conscription have been seen as mutually reinforcing because conscription was associated with the expansion of individual rights and the creation of democratic institutions (Leander, 2004). Military service was in this sense believed to provide a “school of the nation” where conscripts are integrated and acquainted with democratic as well as national ideas, in effect constructing the community as a whole (Leander, 2004). Despite that, democratic countries are nowadays in general much less likely to use conscription as its disadvantages prevail over possible advantages (Asal et al., 2017). Contrary to the traditional understanding, mass conscription is often perceived as not easily compatible with the modern conception of citizens’ rights and obligations in liberal democracies (Pfaffenzeller, 2010).

Economists generally see conscription as a rather inefficient source of manpower (Cohn & Toronto, 2017). While this might seem counterintuitive as conscripts receive lower wages than professional soldiers, this assumption, however, does not take into account the added economic value that would have been produced had the people not been drafted.



Therefore, AVFs are believed to be in most cases and across several economic indicators more cost-efficient than conscript forces (Warner & Negrusa, 2006, p. 155). However, the benefits connected to the transition to AVFs do not manifest themselves immediately (Bove & Cavatorta, 2012). Moreover, the effect of economic considerations is not as straightforward as it might seem since, in the empirical world, it is difficult to determine the real costs of conscription. On a slightly different note, Cohn and Toronto (2017) contend that countries with more tightly regulated labour markets are likelier to use institutionalized conscription so as to avoid recruitment problems and lower deadweight tax costs. Thus, the fact that Nordic countries have some of the more tightly regulated labour markets may be one of the reasons behind their use of conscription.

#### **2.1.4 Why Did Nordic Countries Retain Conscription?**

As mentioned earlier, in the case of the Nordic countries or Switzerland and Austria, conscription remained in place even after the end of the Cold War, a period which was thanks to the improved security situation marked by the widespread abolition of the draft. Jehn and Selden (2002) explain the retention of conscription by the fact that as some of these countries stood aside from the East-West confrontation and relied on themselves for the provision of security, not so much had changed for them with the end of the Cold War. Thus, they argue that because the militaries of countries like Finland resembled militia-based systems, they were more resistant to political pressures to downsize (Jehn & Selden, 2002). However, this fails to fully explain why countries like Norway and Denmark which have been members of NATO, went against the trend anyway.

Anna Leander (2004) offers perhaps a more compelling explanation when she claims that the decision to keep or abolish conscription “depends on how conscription fares as a social and political institution, how legitimate it is”. She argues that Sweden succeeded in reformulating the myths surrounding conscription, making it legitimate in the eyes of citizens, and that this helped the practice to survive (Leander, 2004). Joenniemi (2006), who in his edited volume expands this approach to other Nordic countries, also highlights the importance of divergent meanings of conscription for the explanation of the fate of conscription. Thus, in this sense, the practice of conscription is seen as highly context-dependent and flexible, rather than being determined by some general trends.

### **2.1.5 Issues with Conscription**

Throughout its existence but especially more recently, several contentious issues have surrounded conscription. The first and foremost question is the aforementioned legitimacy of compulsory military service. Whether conscription is perceived as legitimate or not is of great importance because it determines the system's future continuation (Leander, 2004). The fundamental *raison d'être* for the use of general conscription is provided for by the perception of an imminent existential threat. Thus, when the conventional threat of the Cold War disappeared, conscription became, in most cases, difficult to justify (Pfaffenzeller, 2010). However, the fact that the legitimacy of conscription had to a large extent waned even prior to that can be explained by deeper sociocultural shifts that occurred in Western societies (Manigart, 2018, p. 411). Stronger emphasis on individual liberties together with weakening national consciousness have become increasingly difficult to reconcile with compulsory military service.

Relatedly, another point of contention that is increasingly being debated is the fairness of the traditional practice of conscripting only men, which can be seen as a relic from the past when women were not considered as full citizens with equal rights and obligations (Pfaffenzeller, 2010). Mandatory military service, which usually lasts for several months or years, inevitably has a considerable impact on people's lives and future prospects. Therefore, some criticize the fact that it is only men who bear most of the brunt by being obliged to serve in the military (Kosonen et al., 2019) or, from the opposite point of view, receive the benefits that are connected to the performance of military service. Male conscription thus essentially represents a gender-discriminatory law that is scarcely talked about (Heikkilä & Laukkanen, 2022).

## **2.2 Women in the Military**

The relationship between gender and the military still remains a largely understudied topic. With regards to gender-neutral conscription, there are, moreover, very few cases thereof as the phenomenon has started to emerge only recently. Given these limitations, this part of the thesis will first seek to contextualize the topic. First, it will discuss the traditional distinction between functional and societal imperatives which has been used to think about female presence in the military. Following that, the thesis will briefly survey the history of the integration of women into the armed forces and the contemporary

debates accompanying it. Finally, the topic of female conscription and its most prominent example, Israel, will be examined.

### **2.2.1 Functional and Societal Imperatives**

Classical theories of civil-military relations very broadly distinguish between two divergent forces that influence the character of the armed forces. In his seminal 1957 book *The Soldier and the State*, Huntington (2002, p. 2) states that “the military institutions of any society are shaped by two forces: a functional imperative stemming from the threats to the society’s security and a societal imperative arising from the social forces, ideologies, and institutions dominant within the society.” Huntington sees the functional and societal imperatives as conflicting and claims that a military that is overly reflective of societal norms and ideologies (such as liberalism) will not be capable of fulfilling its primary task, that is effective performance. Arguing for an autonomous military, he concludes that for the two imperatives to be congruent, both the military and society should hold conservative views (Huntington, 2002, p. 464). However, Huntington’s conception of a military that is completely isolated from societal and political influences has been criticized by various authors as both undesirable and impracticable, especially in the contemporary society (Burk, 2002).

Nevertheless, the core distinction between the functional and societal imperatives is still present in the debate about the inclusion of women or LGBTQ+ people into the armed forces and its effects on operational effectiveness (Belkin & Levitt, 2001; Dandeker, 2001, 2003; Okros & Scott, 2015). In other words, do the armed forces need to be separate from the values of their parent society in order to perform effectively? The conservative line of thought is that the presence of women is simply in conflict with the functional imperative as it negatively affects the efficiency of the military for the reasons that will be explored below. On the other hand, scholars arguing against discrimination in the military claim that female presence is compatible with the functional imperative as it can solve recruitment problems that plague contemporary militaries and, among other things, brings specific experience that increase the operational effectiveness of missions like peacekeeping (Bridges & Horsfall, 2009). At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Kennedy-Pipe (2000) even went as far as to argue that these debates have become obsolete as conventional wars in which physical capabilities mattered significantly more became a

thing of the past for the Western militaries. Nevertheless, Western militaries have in recent decades conformed to the societal values of equality and fairness and carried out reforms to become more inclusive.

### **2.2.2 History of Female Integration**

Given the universal gendering of war, women were unsurprisingly mostly excluded from serving in the military throughout history. But based on the examples such as the USSR during the Second World War or less prominently the Dahomey Kingdom, Joshua Goldstein (2006, pp. 60-70) in his book *War and Gender* shows that women not only systemically participated in militaries in large numbers but also served in combat positions. However, he concludes that, even in times of extreme need in war, it was only in a handful of cases that women were mobilized to serve in the military in significant numbers (Goldstein, 2006, p. 22). In the vast majority of cases, women used to be banned from the military.

This state of affairs began to change around the 1970s when in countries such as the US conscription was being phased out and militaries, as a consequence, lost their main source of recruitment, which resulted in personnel shortages (King, 2013). In order to substitute for conscripts, the newly all-volunteer armed forces had to turn to a new cohort of potential soldiers – women. Together with increasingly louder feminist voices calling for equal opportunities for men and women, this led to a gradual inclusion of women into the armed forces. On the other hand, in countries where the process of the abolishment of conscription occurred much later, for example in Germany, the legacy of conscription is still somewhat noticeable as women are generally present in the military in lower numbers (King, 2013). Indeed, in general, conscription is seen as having a negative effect on the presence of women in the military (Haltiner, 1998).

The end of the Cold War brought a new wave of integration of women into the armed forces. More countries scrapped conscription and most Western militaries gradually abolished remaining restrictions, mostly in the form of bans on women in combat positions. Technological progress and the changed nature of missions have arguably placed less emphasis on physical capabilities in some positions in the military which again facilitated the integration of women (Kennedy-Pipe, 2000).

### **2.2.3 Issues with Female Integration**

The topic of full integration of women into the military has recently received a lot of attention from scholars and practitioners alike. An especially salient issue nowadays is the participation of women in close combat roles, chiefly in the infantry (King, 2013). The major issue in this discussion centres around the principles of fairness and effectiveness, that is whether female presence affects military performance (Carreiras, 2006, p. 87; Goldstein, 2006, p. 100). This debate reflects the differing views on the (in)compatibility of the functional and societal imperatives.

Those who make the case against women in combat base it on two arguments. First, the physical capabilities of women are inferior to those of men which consequently negatively affects military performance. The second and perhaps less straightforward argument concerns group cohesion. As bonding among male soldiers is often seen as providing a basis for unit cohesion, female presence is believed to disrupt this notion of the “band of brothers” which is important for effectiveness (Simons, 2000). The most well-known proponent of this traditionalist opposition among scholars is Martin van Creveld (2000) who goes as far as to argue that the feminisation of the armed forces partly caused their decline.

On the other hand, according to other scholars, the principles of fairness and effectiveness can be compatible even in the context of the armed forces. While nobody disputes that women are in general physically weaker than men, MacKenzie (2015, p. 107) problematizes the assumption that female physical capabilities are not sufficient for the military. She questions the ability of physical fitness tests to measure the capability to perform operational tasks and adds that women actually surpass men in some abilities such as endurance (MacKenzie, 2015, p. 115). To respond to the claims about diminished group cohesion, scholars argue that what matters in modern all-volunteer militaries are professionalism and teamwork, rather than an elusive bond among men (King, 2017, p. 309).

Notwithstanding the contentious public debate, there has indeed been a trend towards the inclusion of women as most Western countries have already lifted gender-based

restrictions on all positions in the military, with the UK being among the last in 2018. Whether this has had impact on their effectiveness is up for debate. However, for example in Afghanistan and Iraq, female soldiers had already been exposed to combat regardless of any formal rules as the distinction between combat and non-combat positions cannot be always neatly drawn in practice (MacKenzie, 2015, p. 44).

## **2.3 Female Conscription**

Having surveyed the inclusion of women into the armed forces, this part will deal with the topic of female conscription. It is important to note that this thesis makes the distinction between female conscription and gender-neutral conscription. Whereas female conscription is simply military service done by women, the term gender-neutral conscription refers to the drafting of eligible people, regardless of their gender, on the exact same basis. At the moment, the only two countries in the world that have actively implemented gender-neutral conscription are Norway and Sweden. While increasing attention has been paid to the issue of gender in the military, female conscription is still vastly unexplored in academic literature as it represents a rare phenomenon, and in the case of gender-neutral conscription, also a novel one. Therefore, the following part will attempt to contextualize the topic by briefly exploring Israel's system of conscription which represents a remarkable case of a female draft that cannot be omitted in the discussion of women and conscription.

### **2.3.1 The Case of Israel**

The only country in the world that has had an extensive experience with mandatory female conscription is Israel. Although Israel is in a very specific security environment which is also reflected in its armed forces and civil-military relations, it is still useful to examine it more closely. The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) are often seen as a pioneer in the participation of women in the military, as, since 1948, all Jewish women have been required to serve in the armed forces. With women constituting around 40% of all IDF's conscripts nowadays (Gittleman, 2021), this has become a unique phenomenon since no other country has ever conscripted women in such large numbers as Israel.

As indicated earlier, the major reason for implementing conscription for both men and women in Israel were the national security needs of the newly established state which had

to face a very hostile environment. Since then, Israel's security situation has to a great degree improved but the perceived threats that remain have become more asymmetric. The inclusion of women into the military has also been influenced by the fact that the IDF grew out of paramilitary formations in which both men and women participated side by side and that the IDF has consequently been perceived as a "people's army".

When looking at conscription in Israel more closely, women, until very recently, were not treated equally with men (Sasson-Levy, 2007). The division of labour within the military was significantly gendered, with women being banned from many positions so that they usually ended up in low-prestige jobs, serving as secretaries, for example (Sasson-Levy, 2007). However, in recent years, this has been changing – the IDF is gradually becoming increasingly inclusive, with more and more combat positions being opened up to women. Nevertheless, conscription in Israel is not gender-neutral as female conscripts serve a shorter term than male ones (minimum of 24 months compared to 32 for men) and a higher percentage of women is exempted. But with the IDF moving towards greater gender equality, Israel has been a remarkable petri dish for the study of gender dynamics in the military.

### **3 Analytical Framework**

As gender-neutral conscription is a relatively new phenomenon, there is no existing academic literature systematically accounting for its emergence. Therefore, based on the literature surveyed above, the following part will sketch out an original analytical framework that will seek to explain the reasons behind the differences in the (non)introduction of gender-neutral conscription in the Nordic countries. Attempting to take a more complex approach, the analytical framework focuses on functional, societal, as well as cultural factors. More specifically, these factors include the national security situation, role and character of conscription, myths about conscription, integration of women into the armed forces, and, finally, gender equality in the military as a topic. In the cases of Norway and Sweden, the thesis will focus on the situation prior to the introduction of gender-neutral conscription, whereas in the Finnish case, it will look at the situation as it stands today. It must be noted, however, that this framework does not seek to provide a comprehensive model that could be used universally, rather it is specifically tailored to the Nordic context.

#### **3.1.1 National Security Situation**

In the previous section, the link between the use of conscription and more serious threats to national security was established (Asal et al., 2017). With regards to women's participation in the armed forces, national security situation is also considered as a particularly significant factor (Iskra et al., 2002; Segal, 1995). In her model of women's military participation, Segal (1995) sees the relationship between the national security situation and women's roles in the military as curvilinear. Whereas the presence of a grave threat is said to increase women's participation as all human resources have to be mobilized, a moderate threat acts as an inhibitor. Finally, the absence of a threat, given that the particular society is relatively liberal, again increases women's participation. While this model was not originally meant to apply to female conscription, we can expect that the mechanisms behind the relationship will, at least at the medium and low threat spectrum, be very similar.

Thus, the thesis will specifically focus on how the three countries have perceived their security environment in terms of possible threats since the end of the Cold War. The thesis



will also briefly look at the size of the respective militaries and their primary mission, as these factors inherently reflect their threat perception.

### **3.1.2 Role and Character of Conscription**

Conscription is nowadays often seen not only as a source of additional manpower both for the military and the reserves but also as a means of attracting and recruiting potential active-duty soldiers (Braw, 2019). It could be argued that, in countries where one of the main goals of conscription is to attract recruits that will go on to serve as active-duty personnel, an objective will be to have as wide a recruitment pool as possible so that only the most motivated and capable are actually drafted and that a sufficient part of these conscripts will consequently go on to serve as professional soldiers. Thus, in this sense, gender-neutral conscription can be viewed as a reaction to the shortages of suitable recruits for the performance of military service as well as for the armed forces themselves. Indeed, similar arguments pertaining to the extension of the recruitment pool were used earlier in relation to the furthering of the integration of female soldiers into the military (Forster, 2006, p. 104).

Furthermore, as has been outlined above, the military and, by extension, conscription were and to some degree continue to be strongly gendered institutions (Carreiras, 2006, p. 40). Based on that, we can expect that in countries where the draft is very selective, that is involving only a small fraction of a particular age cohort, it would not represent such a problem to include women in the practice of conscription. Genuinely compulsory conscription of women would more likely be regarded as a highly contentious issue, even in more progressive societies.

Specifically, we will look into the character of conscription, that is how big of a part of the particular age cohort was conscripted prior to the introduction of gender-neutral conscription, and the role that the practice played within the armed forces.

### **3.1.3 Legitimisation of Conscription**

The aforementioned work of Leander (2004) and Joenniemi (2006) is unique in the sense that it emphasises the national specificities of legitimising conscription which in the end determine its fate. In the decision to keep or abolish conscription, “re-enchanting” and

reforming the institution so as to adapt to changing circumstances play a significant role. Indeed, the ability to reform will also be of great importance for the purpose of explaining the introduction of gender-neutral conscription. Leander and Joenniemi (2006, p. 167) thus observe two broad patterns with regard to the flexibility of the “myths” that legitimise conscription. First, when society’s understanding of conscription is loaded with very specific and fixed meanings, the institution will be much more difficult to change. When these meanings are thought to be convincing, the practice of conscription will likely continue, despite their rigidity. On the other hand, in cases when the meaning of conscription is not so strictly defined and thus more flexible, the possibilities for reformulating conscription to react to external changes are far greater.

This part of the empirical analysis will, therefore, look at the ways of legitimising conscription in the three countries and consider the flexibility of these “myths” as they relate to the possibility of reforming the practice of conscription. It will, moreover, look at the popularity of conscription.

#### **3.1.4 Integration of Women into the Military**

Military organisations tend to be inherently resistant to changes such as the inclusion of women (Haring, 2020, p. 99). The relative conservatism of the armed forces means that gender equality within the organisation will presumably not be a priority until it is either necessitated by functional needs or until the political leadership or the society provide a strong enough impetus for change. The assumption here is that once the armed forces already accommodated the functional or societal pressures to integrate women, they will not be as resistant to do so again. Thus, whether and for how long have women been accepted and properly integrated into the armed forces is here considered to be an important precondition of the adoption of gender-neutral conscription. More specifically, the thesis will focus on the duration of women’s integration into the military as well as its extent, that is the percentage of female active-duty soldiers and officers.

#### **3.1.5 Gender Equality in the Military as a Topic**

As mentioned above, the armed forces tend to be much slower to change than its parent society, and hence the impetus usually has to come from outside. The fact that the topic

of gender equality in the armed forces is thematised in the political and societal spheres is thought to be of great importance as this will translate into pressure on the military to alter its policies. Therefore, this part will analyse whether society and, by extension, politicians see gender equality in the military as an important issue. One of these issues is male-only conscription, which arguably represents the most glaring example of gender inequality in the military, and it will thus be crucial to examine how do people perceive it.

## 4 Empirical-Analytical Section

### 4.1 Norway

#### 4.1.1 National Security Situation

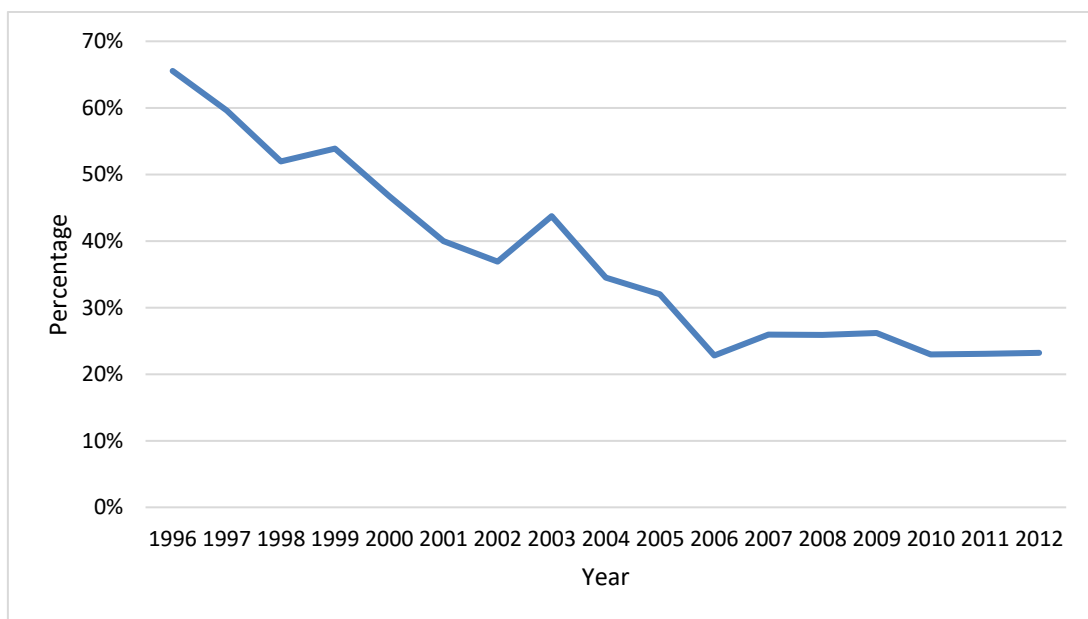
As the country was a founding member of NATO, Norway's security has been inextricably linked to the organisation since the very beginning. However, in contrast to most Western countries in the 1990s, Norway went down the road of continuity with its Cold War security policy, as it retained the focus on territorial and invasion defence up until the 2000s. This was caused partly by the perception of Russia as an unreliable power and the unwillingness of the military and political elites to change (Saxi, 2010). Nevertheless, it still recognised that security threats are now more complex and transnational in nature (Ministry of Defence, 2004). Around the turn of the millennium, Norway thus began to realise that being a loyal alliance member is important for the country's security and it became more willing to participate in expeditionary missions. Norwegian troops eventually took part in most major US- and NATO-led operations (Petersson, 2018, p. 365).

While a large-scale Russian invasion was no longer seen as likely, Norway considered a limited confrontation resulting from strategic competition over resources in the North as a new potential conflict scenario (Saxi, 2010). In particular, it was the High North that has emerged as an area of special importance for Norway due to the abundant presence of natural resources but also its proximity to Russia. Especially since the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, Norway wanted NATO to focus more on territorial defence. Given this uneasiness stemming from Russia's actions, Norway retained reduced, albeit crucial elements of its territorial defence (Petersson, 2018, p. 361), such as conscription, with a special focus on the Arctic region. However, the structure of the Norwegian Armed Forces (NAF) still changed substantially in comparison to the Cold War. The NAF were modernised and downscaled considerably to form a more flexible, yet viable force of about 25 000 soldiers out of which 31% were conscripts (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2013).

#### 4.1.2 Role and Character of Conscription

The cornerstone of Norwegian Cold War security policy was conscription. At its peak, the draft affected 90% of the corresponding male age cohort (Sorensen, 2000). After the Cold War, Norwegian political and military elites were rather hesitant to significantly decrease the number of conscripts. Nevertheless, Norway eventually downscaled conscription to a considerable extent, but not as dramatically as neighbouring Sweden. The yearly intake of conscripts decreased in the early 2000s from around 11 000 to 7 000 people. In 2012, before the decision to make conscription gender-neutral, 7 836 conscripts completed their basic training out of which 7 130 were men (Forsvaret, 2012) which accounts for around 21% of that male age cohort, pointing to a relative selectivity of the practice.

Table 1: Completed military service in Norway – share of eligible age cohort<sup>2</sup>



Source: own dataset based on Forsvaret (2011, 2014), Forsvarsdepartementet (2002, 2005), and Nordic Statistics (2023)

The strategy outlining the modernisation of the military explicitly stated that the aim is to recruit only the most suitable and motivated people so as to guarantee that a sufficient part of them will continue their service for the NAF (Forsvarsdepartementet, 2004). Given

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<sup>2</sup> As the data regarding the number of conscripts who completed military service were not always gender-disaggregated, the number of conscripts, from which the share was calculated, includes also female conscripts, despite women not being eligible for conscription. This might slightly distort the results.

Norway's participation in out-of-area operations, conscription, in reality, worked as a "channel for recruiting personnel to international missions" with conscripts being encouraged to enlist to serve abroad during and after their performance of military service (Græger, 2011a). Nevertheless, the bulk of the military service had to be performed at home anyway so, while the recruitment of personnel was an important feature of the draft, conscripts were also extensively utilised for guarding the Norwegian territory, with many of them being stationed in the northernmost parts of the country (Kosnik, 2017).

#### **4.1.3 Legitimisation of Conscription**

Male conscription was first introduced in Norway in 1814. It was a part of the notion of people's defence which, by being inextricably connected with core national values, enabled the Norwegian armed forces to assume a nation-building role in the early stages of national development (Græger, 2011b), culminating in the establishment of an independent state in 1905. Especially during the Cold War, the concept of total defence, that is the "whole of society approach to national security intended to deter a potential enemy" (Wither, 2020), has provided the framework for Norwegian citizens' participation in defence efforts. It was the institution of general conscription that has been the most prominent manifestation of this notion.

Relatedly, Friis (2006) suggests that, by way of fostering citizen's participation in national defence, conscription was closely tied to the more general legitimisation of the armed forces since its beginning. While conscription in Norway no longer involved as significant a proportion of the people as it had used to, the anchoring of the military with the people and the socialisation of different groups in society remained a significant part of the defence discourse at least until the late 2000s (Græger, 2011a). However, despite the conservative tendencies, the conception of conscription was eventually reformulated to reflect the changing security and societal circumstances. An attempt was made to raise the status of conscription with greater material incentives so as to react to the perceived unfairness of the practice. Moreover, in line with what Leander (2004) calls the "re-enchantment" of conscription, the focus shifted more towards the individual – conscription was framed as an invaluable opportunity for those who are capable enough to be selected, implying a kind of "elitism" of military service. Moreover, special

emphasis was placed on making the military service feel more meaningful so that conscripts have a sense of purpose and feel rewarded (Trøite, 2018).

Nevertheless, even with the draft being more selective, the notion of conscription as a tool connecting the armed forces and society did not, at least on a discursive level, disappear completely in Norway (Græger, 2011b). It was even claimed that the perception of conscription as discriminative or outdated can harm the link between the people and the military (Forsvarsdepartementet, 2013). It seems that this rootedness of conscription in Norwegian society, on the one hand, and its flexibility, on the other, enabled it to maintain a relatively high level of support – in 2012, 77% of Norwegians thought that conscription should be kept (Folk og Forsvar, 2012).

#### **4.1.4 Integration of Women into the Military**

There is a minor, albeit notable precedent for female conscription in Norway which dates back to the Second World War, when Norwegian women living abroad were conscripted so as to perform auxiliary tasks. However, after the war ended, women were eventually banned from holding military positions (Skjelsbæk & Tryggstad, 2009). The issue was raised again in the early 1970s when a government-appointed committee recommended the inclusion of women into the military and the introduction of “auxiliary” female conscription (Ahlbäck et al., 2022). With gender equality playing an increasingly significant role in the political sphere, the Norwegian parliament allowed women to serve in the armed forces with the exception of direct combat positions with effect from 1977. Another important factor was that the 1970s and 1980s were marked by a shortage of male military personnel, which limited the objections of the armed forces to the decision (Orsten, 1999). The final step was taken in 1985, when Norway allowed women to perform military service on a voluntary basis and officially gave them access to all positions in the armed forces including in combat.

Despite this primacy, Norway for a long time struggled with low participation of women in the military because of the system of male conscription. In 2012, with some measures targeted at promoting women’s participation already in place, the number of women in the NAF increased to 9% of all military personnel and to a little over 9% of all officers (Forsvaret, 2012).

#### **4.1.5 Gender Equality in the Military as a Topic**

Given the Norwegian preoccupation with gender equality across many areas, the NAF have not been an exception. As indicated earlier, gender equality in the military has represented an important policy issue in Norway with successive governments seeking to foster the participation of women. A 2007 ministry of defence report emphasised the need for a higher proportion of women in the military because it was seen as important from both a normative point of view of equal rights and opportunities as well as from a utilitarian perspective, as the presence of women provides the armed forces with greater legitimacy and improves the conduct of international missions, for example by facilitating the engagement with local populations (Forsvarsdepartementet, 2007). Therefore, Norway has set out a goal of increasing women's presence among active-duty soldiers to at least 20% by 2020 (Forsvarsdepartementet, 2007). Conscription was identified as the primary tool for achieving this objective given its important role in the recruitment process.

The possibility of introducing gender-neutral conscription in Norway was hotly debated since 2006, with a central role in the discussion being played by the defence minister Anne-Grete Strøm-Erichsen who was actively raising the subject. The government proposed gender-neutral conscription already in 2008 but withdrew the proposal after a fierce debate in the political and public sphere (Skjelsbæk & Tryggestad, 2009). However, the issue did not disappear from the agenda as gender-neutral conscription had been articulated as a long-term objective of not only many of the prominent political representatives but also of key figures in the NAF (Skjelsbæk & Tryggestad, 2009). In 2012, just before its adoption, Norwegian society seemed to be fairly open to the possibility of gender-neutral conscription – according to an opinion poll on defence, 66% of Norwegians thought that conscription should include both men and women, with men having a slightly more favourable stance (Folk og Forsvar, 2012).



## 4.2 Sweden

### 4.2.1 National Security Situation

With its traditional neutrality, Sweden during the Cold War relied on a robust territorial defence based on conscription. After the end of the East/West divide, the security environment in Europe as perceived by Sweden improved dramatically as relations with Russia improved. Starting in the mid-1990s, Swedish defence policy went through a major transformation. With no direct military threat against Swedish territory and greater regional stability (Försvarsberedningen, 2003), Sweden's understanding of security has broadened to incorporate more complex transnational challenges such as terrorism or climate change. This new conception of security has arguably been driven more by foreign policy objectives, rather than the actual need of ensuring security (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2016, p. 480). Thus, in the late 1990s, out-of-area operations became the primary mission of the Swedish military. Having already had a rich experience with international operations, Sweden has pursued a militarily activist policy with its forces deployed in virtually all major international missions of the EU as well as NATO and also participated extensively in UN missions.

The shift in security policy naturally went hand in hand with the restructuring of the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) which primarily entailed a significant downscaling of conscription and overall modernisation. The SAF transformed into a much smaller, easily deployable expeditionary force of nearly 17 000 soldiers in 2008 out of which 43% were conscripts (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2009). Despite the reduced ability of the SAF to provide territorial defence which resulted from this reorientation, successive Swedish governments opted to maintain the policy of military non-alignment by avoiding a formal membership in NATO up until 2022. Nevertheless, Sweden has collaborated very closely with NATO even prior to that.

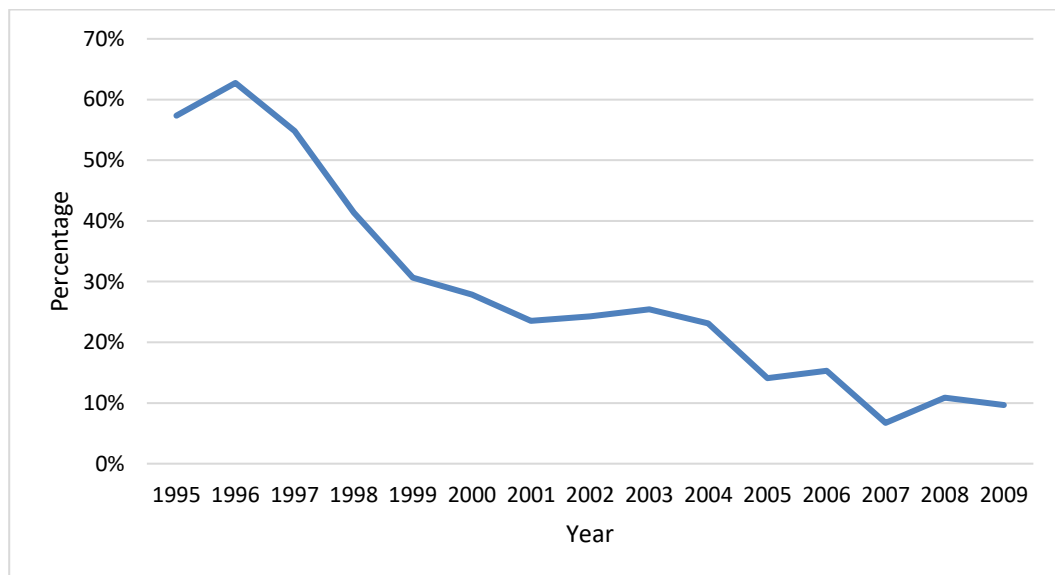
In the 2010s, Russia's aggressiveness grew primarily in relation to Ukraine but also towards the countries of the Nordic-Baltic region, as demonstrated by frequent air space violations (Wieslander, 2022). As a result, territorial defence once again came to the fore of Swedish defence policy (Andersson, 2018, p. 356). The new doctrine entailed the strengthening of defence capabilities and the deepening of the partnership with NATO. Bolstered defence capabilities among other things, included the reintroduction of

conscription starting from 2018, this time in a gender-neutral variant. It must be noted, however, that despite the deterioration of the security situation, in the case of Sweden, no imminent or even medium threat emerged (Wieslander, 2022). Therefore, using Segal’s model, it could be said that the circumstances were still relatively favourable to the expansion of women’s roles in the military, which this time entailed the adoption of gender-neutral conscription.

#### 4.2.2 Role and Character of Conscription

During the Cold War, as a way to deter a potential attack, Sweden made extensive use of conscripts with up to 90% of young men being drafted for military service (Sorensen, 2000). This changed dramatically in the mid-1990s, when Sweden swiftly abandoned its policy of universal conscription in favour of the recruitment of only a small fraction of the male population. In 2008, prior to the decision to deactivate conscription, 6 800 people were conscripted (Försvarsmakten, 2022) which accounts for about 10% of the particular male cohort.

Table 2: Completed military service in Sweden – share of eligible age cohort



Source: own dataset based on Försvarsmakten (2002, 2004, 2007, 2011) and Nordic Statistics (2023)

Evidently, the conscription system was considerably selective and thus predominantly voluntary. Similarly to Norway, the reason behind that was that, first and foremost,

conscription generated future active-duty personnel and so the people performing military service had to be both highly capable as well as motivated. Moreover, with the extensive Swedish engagement abroad at the time, the recruitment of people, who just completed their basic training, for international missions was the primary objective of conscription (Regeringen, 2004).

Nevertheless, in 2009, the Swedish government made the decision to shelve conscription as it believed that voluntary recruitment will be better suited for the then security situation and, by extension, the main mission of the SAF as well as more cost-effective (Regeringen, 2009). At the same time, conscription was extended to include women. However, the transition to an all-volunteer force starting in 2011 was not particularly successful as the Swedish Armed Forces repeatedly failed to fill enough active-duty as well as reservist positions (Braw, 2019). This, together with a worsening security environment, led to the decision to re-introduce conscription in 2017 with the aim of increasing military readiness (Regeringen, 2017). The plan was to keep the draft extremely selective, with around 4 000 people being called up for service in the first few years.

#### **4.2.3 Legitimation of Conscription**

For a long time, conscription has constituted an integral part of the Swedish total defence policy, a much broader concept that presupposes the participation of the entire society in national defence. After being introduced for the first time in 1901, conscription was reformed several times and, for a brief period, even abolished. Nevertheless, conscription in Sweden proved relatively resilient. Leander (2006, p. 119) attributes this to the fact that the meaning of conscription in Sweden has been rather vague as it has needed to accommodate divergent views on its purpose and form. The absence of any great myths justifying the use of conscription has, therefore, given it surprising flexibility. Indeed, in an effort to re-conceptualise the relationship between the state, society and the military, the total defence law was reformed in 1994, extending its scope to include women while at the same time making conscription more voluntary (Leander, 2006, p. 130). One of the major ways of reinvigorating conscription to combat the malaise surrounding it was the emphasis on individual freedoms and the opportunities that military service provides, rather than framing it as a national duty. Highlighting the exclusivity of conscription, a

2016 government inquiry report called a person's selection for the performance of military service "a merit in itself" (Strand, 2021). This narrative concerning conscription has been consciously revived and even reinforced with its reinstatement (Strand, 2023).

Furthermore, pointing to the relative indifference of Swedish society, Leander (2004) describes another specificity of Swedish conscription when she states that its "reforms are not subjected to critical scrutiny; they pass by quietly, largely unnoticed outside a narrow circle with interests in military affairs. It is not politically hazardous to reform conscription". Indeed, this turned out to be the case in 2009, when conscription was deactivated and, simultaneously, made gender-neutral (Persson & Sundevall, 2019) and to some extent even in 2017 when the decision was made to bring it back. The reason for this Swedish indifference can be found in the aforementioned lack of a "great" story underpinning conscription in Sweden (Leander, 2004), or the fact that since the end of the Cold War the draft involved only a small fraction of society.

#### **4.2.4 Integration of Women into the Military**

Ahlbäck et al. (2022) consider the continuity of women's performance of auxiliary defence tasks that commenced during the Second World War in the so-called Lotta corps to be an important factor in the early integration of women into the armed forces. Nevertheless, the issue of women's accession to the military was first properly raised in connection to conscription, when, in the mid-1960s, the youth league of the People's Party called for military service for both men and women (Persson & Sundevall, 2019). After the Air Force conducted an investigation, it concluded that positions in the armed forces cannot be opened to women because that would require basic military training, i.e. conscription which, however, was exclusive to men (Persson & Sundevall, 2019). Nonetheless, already in 1969, the impetus came from within the military when the same branch asked for the permission to include women because of pressing personnel shortages (Kronsell & Svedberg, 2001). After a state investigation, this proposal was once again rejected.

Finally, in 1980, women were granted the opportunity to perform military service, however, until 1995, it applied only to women who planned to become officers. The country took a more gradual approach as, over the course of the 1980s, more and more

positions in the military were being opened to women with the last bans on combat positions being lifted in 1989 (Persson & Sundevall, 2019). Thus, together with Norway and Denmark, Sweden became one of the first countries in the world with a military completely open to women (Ahlbäck et al., 2022). Despite this head start and the SAF's efforts to foster female participation, the number of women serving in the military was very low – prior to the deactivation of conscription, it was barely 5% (Försvarsmakten, 2008). By 2017, women accounted for 8% of active-duty personnel (NATO, 2017).

#### **4.2.5 Gender Equality in the Military as a Topic**

With Sweden being a leader in the promotion of women's rights across many areas, gender (in)equality in the armed forces has been an issue that has concerned the SAF longer than most militaries. With the SAF's extensive deployment abroad, gender equality in the SAF was primarily thematised in connection to the implementation of the UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (SOU, 2009). The resolution, among other things, called for a higher percentage of women in international operations as female personnel were seen as bringing different perspectives and skills that can help improve the effectiveness of such operations. Thus, comparably to Norway, the aim was to increase the presence of women in the SAF, and it was female conscription that was recognised as the most effective instrument for achieving this goal (SOU, 2009). However, as was suggested by Persson and Sundevall (2019), the preoccupation with international missions has somewhat side-lined the tackling of gender issues in the Swedish military itself.

With regard to gender-neutral conscription, the debate and the eventual decision to introduce it took place without significant attention from the public as the discussion was skewed by the simultaneous deactivation of conscription (Persson & Sundevall, 2019). Seven years later, when the reintroduction of (already gender-neutral) conscription was being debated, there was no or very little opposition from politicians or the public as the move was seen as a matter of course (Strand, 2023). Prior to that, it is unfortunately difficult to draw any conclusions on the views of the Swedish society on conscription as it relates to gender equality because the last available opinion poll that posed this question to the public is from 2006. At the time, 40% of Swedes considered female conscription a good idea, whereas 37% were against it and 23% were undecided (Stütz, 2006).

Nevertheless, in 2016, when conscription was already gender-neutral but shelved, 53% of people in Sweden supported the re-introduction of conscription as the best defence option, knowing it would also apply to women (MSB, 2017).

## **4.3 Finland**

### **4.3.1 National Security Situation**

In the case of Finland, it is especially important to highlight the events of the Second World War. Following the Soviet invasion of Finland in 1939, the country fought two wars with the USSR, eventually retaining its independence in the shadow of its bigger neighbour. Over the course of the Cold War, Finland thus did not officially belong to either of the two camps but had to, to a considerable extent, accommodate the wishes of the Soviet Union to retain its position, a phenomenon known as Finlandization. Able to possess only limited defence capabilities under the terms of the 1948 Finno-Soviet treaty, Finland relied on universal male conscription.

The end of the Cold War brought about an unprecedented improvement in Finland's security environment. The country officially shifted its position from neutrality to non-alignment while forging an ever-closer relationship with NATO and became an active EU member. Finland never ceased to perceive Russia as a threat, although its importance in the country's strategic calculus diminished considerably, especially in the early 2000s. Indeed, up until 2008 or even as late 2014, the relations with Russia were fairly good, being characterised by extensive economic ties (Szymański, 2018). Thus, in this period, Russia was not seen as posing a significant military threat, although it was emphasised that the possibility of a conflict cannot be excluded (Prime Minister's Office, 2009, 2013).

Nevertheless, the end of the Cold War did not bring any substantial changes in the structure or mission of the Finnish armed forces (Andersson, 2018, p. 350). Finland has maintained a strong focus on territorial defence. In 2023, the Finnish Defence Forces (FDF) consist of around 19 600 soldiers out of which 60% are conscripts, the mobilisation strength is around 285 000 people (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023). While the FDF prioritised territorial defence for the entire period, it has also participated in out-of-area operations of both the UN and NATO. However, foreign deployment has

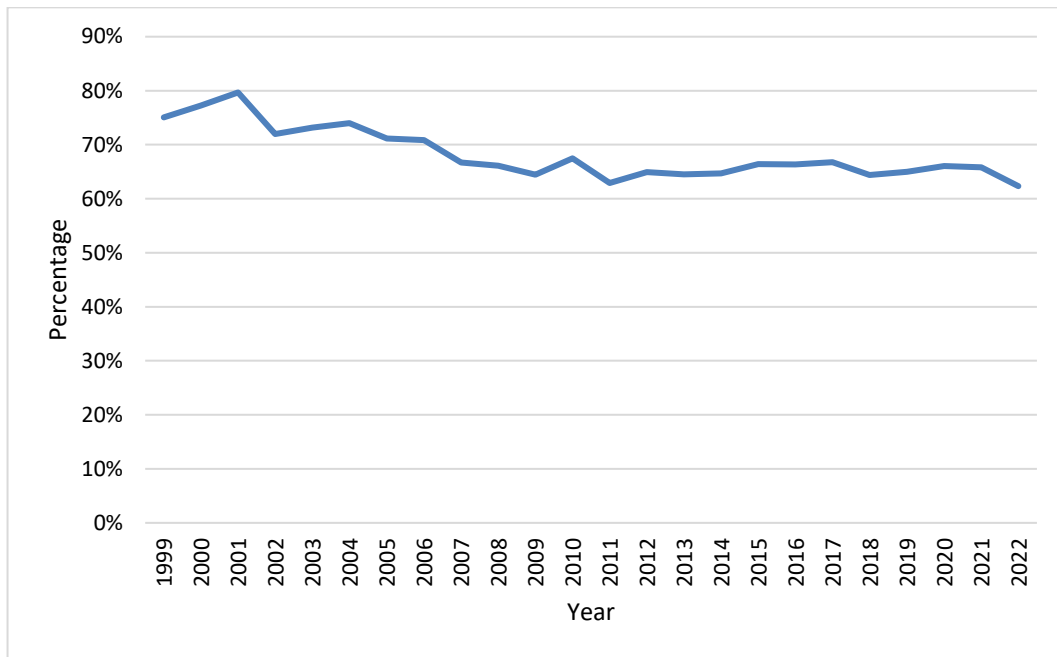
never become the primary mission for the Finnish armed forces, unlike those of its Nordic counterparts.

With Russia's aggressiveness growing over the past ten years, the security situation in the Nordic-Baltic region as perceived by Finland has gradually deteriorated, becoming more tense and unpredictable (Prime Minister's Office, 2017; Finnish Government, 2021). Following the invasion of Ukraine, Finland reacted by strengthening its security policy which, in a historic move, includes joining NATO in order to have explicit security guarantees.

#### **4.3.2 Role and Character of Conscription**

With territorial defence being the primary task of the FDF, (almost) universal conscription represents the cornerstone of Finland's "credible national defence" policy (Sallinen, 2007, p. 162). Although the conscript intakes were somewhat reduced in comparison to the Cold War days, Finland is still one of the very few remaining European countries whose conscription is the closest to the traditional model of general conscription which is compulsory for every male citizen. According to the law, every Finnish man is liable for service – only those who are physically or mentally unable are exempt. Kosonen and Mälkki (2022, p. 468) state that, in 2020, slightly more than 70% of the particular male age cohort were called up and about 65% of all men actually completed their military service before they turned thirty. In 2022, for instance, 19 058 people completed their training which accounts for about 62% of the corresponding male age cohort (Puolustusvoimat, 2022).

Table 3: Completed military service in Finland – share of eligible age cohort



Source: own dataset based on Puolustusministeriö (2010), Puolustusvoimat (2015, 2019, 2022), and Nordic Statistics (2023)

The Finnish political elites have long considered the military’s reliance on conscription as the most optimal arrangement. With vast territory, a small population, and a threatening neighbour, the training of conscripts and the maintenance of large reserves is seen as the most cost-effective way of protecting the country while sustaining a relatively low defence budget. Given the fact that around 43% of conscripts serve for 165 days and 14% for 255 (Intti, 2022), it is not very realistic that most conscripts can obtain genuinely thorough training during such a short period of time. Training is conducted on the basis of the principle of “troop production” whereby conscripts are trained to take on a specific role in the military organisation in an event of war. In a succinct summary of the role of conscription in Finland, Braw (2019) states that its “main contribution to the Finnish defence posture is mass, not specialist expertise”.

### 4.3.3 Legitimisation of Conscription

In the Finnish conception of conscription, historical legacy plays a particularly powerful role. After its introduction in 1878, conscription was used as a vehicle for the construction of the Finnish national identity within the Russian empire (Laitinen, 2006, p. 42). Following the civil war in 1917 that gave rise to an independent Finland, national service



in the form of conscription was meant to help integrate the divided country as well as to legitimate the new regime (Kettunen, 2018, p. 268).

The key event for the development of conscription came with the Winter War of 1939-1940, when the Red Army invaded Finland which was, however, able to resist the attack despite Soviet technical and numerical superiority. Universal conscription and the overall will of the people to defend the country are thought to have had a decisive influence on the outcome of the war. Thus, the successful Finnish performance during the Second World War cemented the practice of conscription (Kosonen & Mälkki, 2022, p. 457). Laitinen (2006, p. 51) therefore argues that the "spirit of the Winter War" "has worked so well that conscription has turned into something almost sacrosanct and it has been difficult to suggest any alternative paths in terms of military manpower recruitment". The reason for this rigidity is that the will to defend is not only an inextricable part of the Finnish "comprehensive national defence" concept, but more importantly because it forms a basis for the Finnish national identity (Laitinen, 2006, p. 43). By tying the nation together in the face of a common threat, the Winter War provided a formative moment that resides in the Finnish national consciousness up to this day.

These accounts of conscription are reflected in the continuous popularity of this practice. In 2022, a sweeping 82% of Finns thought that the current system of conscription should be retained, however, when asked about the best defence system for Finland, only 53% see the current general conscription as the most suitable model (ABDI, 2022). Despite this peculiar dissonance, the support for the model in place, whatever the wording of the question, is decreasing the younger the respondents are. For under-25-year-olds it is 69% and 36% respectively (ABDI, 2022). Nevertheless, the will to defend the country (also 82% in 2022) remains exceptionally high in Finland (ABDI, 2022).

#### **4.3.4 Integration of Women into the Military**

The integration of women into the FDF occurred significantly later than in the rest of the Nordic countries. As Segal's model assumes, in times of a perceived moderate threat to national security, women's roles in the armed forces will not likely progress (Segal, 1995). This was clearly the case in Finland, as the Soviet threat sustained the need for general male-only conscription which tends to hinder women's military participation

(Haltiner, 1998). Ahlbäck (2022) takes a more nuanced view when he argues that it was not only the existence of a threat that impeded the process but also the absence of other factors that prompted the integration of women into the armed forces of Norway and Sweden. In contrast to the two countries, Finland did not suffer from a shortage of manpower and Finnish feminist organisations argued mostly against the inclusion of women in the armed forces as it was contradictory to their pacifist worldview. Moreover, the wartime organisation of Finnish women was banned and stigmatised, thereby discontinuing women's performance of military and hybrid tasks (Ahlbäck, 2022).

The political debate about the inclusion of women into the military was initiated by Finland's first female defence minister Elisabeth Rehn only in the early 1990s. With the diminishing East-West confrontation, the Finnish political and military establishment concluded that there was nothing that prevented them from accommodating the rising pressure from society to integrate women into the military (Ahlbäck et al., 2022). Thus, in 1995, a sweeping reform opened up all positions in the armed forces to women and introduced the possibility of voluntary military service for them. Yet, in 2019, women constituted barely 4% of full-time personnel in the Finnish Defence Forces and 3% of officers (NATO, 2021). This can partly be attributed to the system of universal male conscription, which overrides any efforts focused on the increase in women's participation (NATO, 2021).

#### **4.3.5 Gender Equality in the Military as a Topic**

Finland has arguably somewhat failed to translate wider gender equality in society to its armed forces. The most visible bastion of gender inequality in the Finnish military is the institution of conscription. Given how important a role conscription plays in Finnish society and how many people it affects, the debate about the most suitable model of the draft rarely dies down. The discussion has been further fuelled after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which provided an impetus for the reconsideration of the current conception of national defence, including conscription (Kaarkoski & Häkkinen, 2023). While the current model is relatively popular, Kosonen et al. (2019) show that the inequality among men and women that is inherent in the system is increasingly being perceived as a problem. This is also reflected in the support for general conscription for both men and women, which has risen almost threefold since 2016 to the current 31% (ABDI, 2022).

Moreover, several politicians, civil-society groups or even the Finnish conscript union have called for a conscription system that is more gender-equal.

Finnish political representatives have for a long time maintained that the country's military defence needs are sufficiently met with the current system of conscription (Puolustusministeriö, 2010; Puolustusvaliokunta, 2021). While women who volunteer for military service are considered as an important complement to the system of male conscription, the primary focus has been on the strengthening of women's voluntary participation in national defence as a whole (Puolustusvaliokunta, 2021), not necessarily with regards to military service. Nevertheless, the government recognises that the arrangement is being increasingly perceived as unfair. The reform planned for 2025 tries to partially address this by extending compulsory military call-ups to women without making the actual performance of conscription compulsory for them (Yle News, 2023).

## **5 Summary and Conclusion**

### **5.1 Summary and Comparative Discussion**

#### **5.1.1 National Security Situation**

Since the mid-1990s, Norway on balance perceived its security situation as good and stable as there were very low direct threats to the country's security. However, Norway became somewhat uneasy about Russia's actions in the late 2000s. It was in this security environment that gender-neutral conscription was decided upon in 2013. Sweden's situation was quite similar. In 2010, when conscription was extended to women but at the same time deactivated, Sweden faced low direct threats to its security. Thus, using Segal's model, it could be said that in both cases the circumstances were more or less favourable to the expansion of women's roles in the military. Although Sweden's eventual decision to re-introduce the already gender-neutral conscription was partly fuelled by Russia's invasion of Crimea, the deterioration of the security environment was arguably not dramatic enough to hinder any progress in this regard.

While Finland's situation was not as favourable as in the case of Norway and Sweden, up until even as late 2014, its security environment was overall considered to be relatively good. However, due to their immediate proximity and historical experience, Finland was still cautious about Russia. This was reflected in Finland's insistence on the need for territorial defence as well as in the structure of its armed forces based on general conscription. Yet, it is up for debate to what extent this was a result of path dependence rather than the existence of a "real" threat to Finland's security. Thus, turning again to Segal's categorisation, the security environment can arguably be characterised as a low-threat one until 2008 or even 2014. This was, however, followed by a period of considerable worsening of the situation.

#### **5.1.2 Role and Character of Conscription**

Before the decision to introduce gender-neutral conscription, the draft in Norway and Sweden was relatively selective – out of the eligible male age cohort, 21% and 10% respectively were conscripted for service. The standards for conscripts were therefore higher, with emphasis placed on their capabilities and motivation. Relatedly, the primary, albeit not exclusive purpose of conscription in these two countries was no longer to man

large militaries but instead to attract future career soldiers who will ideally serve in international missions. Given this arrangement, gender-neutral conscription was seen as a natural extension whereby a larger pool of capable and motivated young people was made available for the armed forces to choose from. Thus, in essence, conscription was meant to ensure that the recruitment needs of the military will be met. Moreover, with the focus on international deployment, the increase in female participation in the military associated with gender-neutral conscription was, especially in Norway, highly desirable, because the presence of women was for various reasons thought to be beneficial for this type of operations (Olsson et al., 2022).

In Finland, on the other hand, the primary role of conscription has been to train as many people as possible and consequently fill the reserves, similarly to the Cold War. Conscription is thus almost universal – in 2022, 20 600 people were drafted which accounts for 67% of the corresponding male age group. In this case, making conscription gender-neutral while maintaining roughly the same intake of conscripts would probably mean that some portion of women (like men, after all) would have to be drafted against their will. Given the generally deeply embedded belief that men are the ones who should fight and, by extension, serve in the military, forcing women to perform military service without them willing to do so would in no way be politically feasible in the current circumstances. This has not been the case in Norway and Sweden where conscription is so selective that it is, in most cases, essentially voluntary.

### **5.1.3 Legitimisation of Conscription**

In Norway, conscription originally served as a nation-building tool out of which developed the perceived need to anchor the armed forces with the people through the retention of the institution of military service. This was not so much the case in Sweden where conscription was formulated rather vaguely and was not connected to any “political project”, in effect largely resulting in the society’s indifference towards it. Nevertheless, when the security environment changed with the end of the Cold War, conscription was in both countries downscaled so much that only a minority of people were being drafted. This undermined the social contract based on fair treatment that had sustained the practice. According to Margaret Levi (1997, p. 208), the consent of the people with conscription and their eventual compliance depend on how fair is the practice perceived

to be. Therefore, in Norway and Sweden, a different way of legitimising conscription had to be found if conscription was to be retained. Both countries thus attempted to reconceptualise conscription to make it more desirable by stressing its exclusivity and providing benefits for those who are selected. Importantly for this thesis, another way of modernising conscription was its extension to women, which fits into the context of Nordic countries' emphasis on gender equality (Strand, 2023) as well as to the narrative of greater selectivity of the practice.

In Finland, conscription has been inextricably linked to the nation's resistance during the Winter War. The will to defend as manifested by general conscription is not only a part of the Finnish approach to defence but has also helped to construct modern Finnish national identity. Therefore, given the importance of this formative moment, the conscription system in Finland has become deeply embedded and thus rigid as can be demonstrated by the reluctance to adapt the military to the changing geopolitical and sociocultural circumstances of the past few decades, including the emphasis on gender equality. This rigidity is in stark contrast to the rather flexible nature of conscription in Norway and particularly in Sweden.

#### **5.1.4 Integration of Women into the Military**

The gradual integration of women into the Norwegian and Swedish armed forces took place over the course of the 1970s and 1980s. The combination of gender equality being on the politicians' agenda and the fact that militaries suffered from a lack of personnel can account for the early opening up of the armed forces to women. The functional imperative of women as a solution to personnel shortages was mirrored later with the introduction of gender-neutral conscription which was aimed at attracting a sufficient number of high-quality conscripts and, by extension, of active-duty soldiers. In Finland, on the other hand, the opening up of the military to women was delayed until 1995, a period marked by the improvement of the security situation, and was consequently more abrupt. Prior to that, the Finnish military had not suffered from personnel shortages and the decision was therefore based solely on the accommodation of societal pressures.

The numerical representation of women in the Norwegian and Swedish militaries before the introduction of gender-neutral conscription was only slightly higher than in Finland

which can be explained by the systems of male conscription that were in place. However, this lower representation of women in the military was read differently in the three countries – whereas in Norway and Sweden it was for a long time seen as something that should be addressed, Finland did not necessarily see the increase of female presence as a priority.

### **5.1.5 Gender Equality in the Military as a Topic**

The political representatives of Norway and Sweden advocated for a higher representation of women in the armed forces from the point of view of equal rights and obligations, on the one hand, and of more practical arguments, on the other. These functional arguments included an extended pool of potential personnel and improved operational effectiveness in international missions as well as greater legitimacy of the military. In this sense, gender-neutral conscription was considered as the primary way of achieving the objective of a greater proportion of women in the military.

In Finland, the political establishment articulated the issue rather differently as it was mostly the participation of women in national defence in general that was emphasised, not necessarily the need to foster their participation in the military through conscription. Despite that, it seems that the Finnish society is increasingly perceiving male conscription as unfair.

## **5.2 Conclusion**

This thesis set out to explore why Norway and Sweden introduced gender-neutral conscription, whereas Finland has maintained conscription only for men. To achieve that, an analytical framework based on the surveyed literature delineated factors that were deemed to have played a role. It included the following factors: national security situation, role and character of conscription, its legitimisation, integration of women into the military, and gender equality in the military as a topic. Utilising this framework, the empirical analysis has, by and large, identified common patterns in the cases of Norway and Sweden across most of the analysed factors and pointed to the mostly contrasting results in the case of Finland.

First, in Norway and Sweden, the national security situation has been perceived to be more favourable than in Finland. Whereas the first two countries used conscription as a tool for the recruitment of future active-duty soldiers and therefore selected only the most suitable ones, in Finland, the primary objective of conscription has been to train as many people as possible and consequently generate reservists. As for the legitimisation of conscription, while Norway and Sweden eventually reformulated their conception of conscription, in Finland, the myths sustaining it were so strong that the country could retain the draft almost unchanged. Another factor was that in Norway and Sweden women were allowed to enter the military earlier than in Finland. Finally, it has been shown that the Norwegian and Swedish political representatives perceived gender inequality and low representation of women in the military as an issue that should be tackled.

In its exploration, the thesis went beyond the simple assumption that it was the progressive views of the Norwegian and Swedish societies, that is the societal imperative, that translated into the introduction of gender-neutral conscription. Nor was it solely the presence of a threat in Finland's vicinity and the resulting functional imperative that has hindered its adoption. Instead, the thesis showed that the reasons behind the differences are complex and intertwined. By adopting the gender-neutral model of conscription, the political leadership in Norway and Sweden reacted to both functional needs as well as to societal pressures. In Finland, the retention of conscription for men was not exclusively the response to the functional imperative but was, to a considerable extent, sustained by the ingrained myths.

Naturally, the thesis is not without its limitations. One of the possible drawbacks is that this type of analysis cannot causally determine which factors were more and which less important for answering the research question. Moreover, as the academic literature dealing with this topic is very limited, if not non-existent, it cannot be ruled out that there could have been other variables not identified by the framework that have influenced the introduction of gender-neutral conscription. To account for this limitation, further research in the form of more in-depth studies is needed.

Despite its limitations, this study hopefully improved our understanding of the emergence of gender-neutral conscription, a promising, yet still largely overlooked phenomenon. In



doing so, it developed a basic framework for analysis which can, when considering possible specificities, be applied to other cases.

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