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Gender Advisors in NATO militaries

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Abstract

*This paper is about the experiences of Gender Advisors in NATO and partner militaries, and the question of whether militaries can contribute to a feminist vision of peace and security. Gender Advisors are increasingly being adopted as a mechanism to help militaries to implement commitments under the Women, Peace and Security agenda. Based on semi-structured interviews and a workshop with individuals working as Military Gender Advisors from 2009 to 2016 in Afghanistan, Kosovo and in NATO and national military commands and headquarters, this paper explores their own perceptions of their work, its goals, shortcomings and achievements. It highlights Military Gender Advisors' strong commitment to Women, Peace and Security aims, but the resistance their work faces within their institutions, and challenges of inadequate resourcing, preparation and contextual knowledge. Military Gender Advisors' experiences paint a picture of NATO and partner Militaries having in some places made progress in protection and empowerment of local women, but fragile and partial. These findings speak to wider debates within feminist security studies around whether and how militaries achieve human security in peacekeeping operations, and the risks of militarisation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda.*

**Keywords** feminist security studies; military; gender; NATO; peacekeeping; Afghanistan

## **Introduction**

NATO has been developing its approach to implementing the UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCRs) on Women, Peace and Security since 2007, placing the use of Military Gender Advisors both in headquarters and on operations at the centre of its efforts. The remit of Military Gender Advisors is, in broad terms, to enable militaries to respond to the demands of these resolutions: to protect women and girls from the harms of armed conflict, to ensure women's participation in efforts to build peace and security, and to support gender equality within their own force. In this research, we have captured the reflections of 21 Military Gender Advisors working within different NATO and partner militaries, structures and operations over a seven-year timespan. We consider what their experiences tell us about military engagement with the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

From just a handful of Gender Advisors within NATO a decade ago, NATO now claims to have a well-functioning, fully established and financed network of Military Gender Advisors across the civilian and military elements of its institutions and field commands (Coomaraswamy 2015, 258). Within the national militaries of NATO member and partner nations, as at the end of 2016, 696 Military Gender Advisors had been trained.<sup>1</sup> The Gender

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<sup>1</sup> Noting that these figures are based on self-reporting by nations to NATO. Not all of the Gender Advisors reported as 'trained' would have completed NATO's accredited training scheme, and the quality and rigour of nations' Gender Advisor training varies.

Advisor role has been created in at least 30 armed forces: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Hungary, Georgia, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States (NATO IMS Office of the Gender Advisor 2017). Gender expertise now being a designated a ‘NATO capability,’ one can expect other NATO, partner and allied armed forces to follow suit.<sup>2</sup> The UN is emulating NATO’s approach, expanding the deployment of Military Gender Advisors in peace operations.<sup>3</sup> A number of African peacekeeping militaries (including Cameroon, Ghana, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa and Uganda) have developed Gender Advisor roles or sent personnel to NATO Gender Advisor training. As such, what we can learn from the experiences of Gender Advisors within a NATO context - what they have been able to achieve, and the factors that inhibit them - is of practical importance to a wide range of militaries, and has bearing on the broader question of whether militaries can meaningfully support the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

The following section of this paper gives a short overview of the Women, Peace and Security agenda, outlining its goals around protection, participation, prevention, relief and recovery. It

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<sup>2</sup> Through NATO’s Defence Planning Process, Allies must report to NATO every two years on how they are developing gender capability, as part of harmonising their national defence plans with those of NATO (Private meeting, NATO Headquarters, 30 May 2016).

<sup>3</sup> As of March 2017, the UN had a Military Gender Advisor within seven of its peacekeeping missions (Private correspondence with UN DPKO Military Gender Officer, 16 March 2017).

explores tensions between a demand that military operations adopt a more feminist vision of security, and concern that involving militaries in achieving goals around Women, Peace and Security *militarises* and thus denigrates these efforts. It highlights particular critique of framing NATO as an actor credibly able to pursue a feminist project. The paper then proceeds to discuss why, in light of the foregoing, it is important to listen to NATO's Gender Advisors, and what this research adds to scholarship that has engaged with them. The subsequent sections then trace the evolution of the role of Gender Advisor within NATO and analyse how Gender Advisors' goals, as they describe them, conform to the key dimensions of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. We explore how Gender Advisors describe their achievements, both in terms of impacts upon their own institution and (where in mission) upon local security and women's empowerment. We then examine the challenges they described, and the inhibitors of their work. In our conclusions, we reflect upon the implications of these findings for broader conceptual debates around military involvement in the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

### **Military engagements with feminism; feminist engagements with militarism**

The UN Security Council has, at the time of writing, adopted eight UNSCRs on Women, Peace and Security, defining what has come to be referred to as the 'Women, Peace and Security Agenda'.<sup>4</sup> Although wide ranging, the unifying goals of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda are to strengthen the *protection* of women and girls from sexual and other

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<sup>4</sup> UNSCR 1325 (2000); UNSCR 1820 (2008); UNSCR 1888 (2009); UNSCR 1889 (2009); UNSCR 1960 (2010); UNSCR 2106 (2013); UNSCR 2122 (2013) and UNSCR 2242 (2015).

forms of violence in conflict-affected contexts; promotion of *participation* of women in conflict-resolution and peacebuilding; and to increase their role in decision making regarding the *prevention* and resolution of conflict. There are also a range of commitments linked to relief and recovery processes: meeting women and girls' needs, and fostering women's participation.

The texts of the resolutions refer directly to armed forces in a range of ways, including increasing the representation of women at decision-making levels within defence institutions; gender-responsive demobilisation programmes; vetting of armed and security services; training of peacekeepers on gender, women's rights and protection; deployment of more female peacekeepers; and prevention and accountability for sexual exploitation and abuse. In many states where National Action Plans have been developed to guide implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, the Ministry of Defence is one of the responsible executive bodies. Amongst NATO nations, many National Action Plans contain provisions to increase women's representation in the armed forces and military operations; and on training for the armed forces around women, peace and security and, in some cases, 'gender perspectives' (Reeves 2013, 15–16). Indeed, according to their own reporting to NATO, more than 96% of NATO member nations include gender in pre-deployment training and exercises, 77% include gender in operational planning, and 80% provide education and training programmes related to gender (NATO IMS Office of the Gender Advisor 2017, 33).

NATO adopted its first policy on Women, Peace and Security in 2007. The policy's guiding rationale was presented as 'improv[ing] the effectiveness of NATO-led Operations and Missions to ensure overall mission success ... ensur[ing] that maximum effect can be drawn from incorporating gender perspectives into NATO's approach' (NATO/EAPC, 2007). This strategic framing of Women, Peace and Security as a tool to make NATO more effective is



problematic for many feminists, as discussed below. This and subsequent NATO policies on Women, Peace and Security have been adopted not only by the (now) 29 NATO members, but through the 50-member Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), a multilateral forum for dialogue and consultation on political and security-related issues among NATO Allies and partner countries. In 2008, NATO's highest governing body tasked the Strategic Commands to provide a set of guidelines on the implementation of UNSCR 1325 (NATO 2010), which led to the September 2009 *Bi-Strategic Command Directive 40-1 on Integrating UNSCR 1325 and gender perspectives in the NATO command structure*. This directed gender mainstreaming 'in order to improve operational effectiveness' and as a 'force multiplier' (NATO 2009, para. 1.3, 1.4). Further guiding practical implementation, in 2010 the EAPC adopted an *Action Plan for the Implementation of the NATO/EAPC Policy on Women, Peace and Security*. NATO's Policy on Women, Peace and Security was revised in 2011 and 2014; the Action Plan likewise in 2014 and 2016.<sup>5</sup> Both the Policy and Action Plan are being revised again in 2018. It is thus clear that NATO has embraced the Women, Peace and Security agenda, but the significance and value of this engagement is hotly debated.

Militaries are viewed by many feminist scholars as fundamentally inimical to feminism, institutions of destructive power and inherent misogyny (for a full account of their critique, see Duncanson 2017). Militaries perpetrate devastating violence in war, which disproportionately affects women when the long term impacts, including of forced migration,

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<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed overview of NATO's policy development around Women, Peace and Security, see Wright (2016).

and sexual and gender-based violence are considered (Rehn and Johnson Sirleaf 2002; Ormhaug et al. 2009). Even where described as ‘pacifying’ or ‘liberating’ missions, military interventions remain violent, for some feminists, often ‘wars of extraction’ (Peterson and Runyan 2013, 143), involving the logic of all war: ‘opposition, differentiation and the othering of peoples’ (Eisentsein 2007, 25; see also Whitworth 2004).

As well as perpetrating direct physical violence, militaries are implicated in equally pernicious structural violence. States’ military-industrial complexes organise economies around producing weapons rather than civilian goods and absorb vast amounts of funding that could otherwise be spent on achieving human security (Peterson and Runyan 2013, 159; Cockburn 2007, 239). The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) highlights the opportunity-costs at play: the world’s total military expenditure in 2013 was estimated to be \$1.747 trillion (WILPF 2014, 2). Only a small fraction of that would be required to fund the measures to achieve the Millennium Development Goal for gender equality, such as women’s economic empowerment, family planning, and women’s participation and leadership. A feminist vision of peace and security, as articulated by WILPF and reflected in feminist scholarship, is for ‘a world free from violence and armed conflict in which human rights are protected and women and men are equally empowered and involved in positions of leadership at the local, national and international levels,’ hand in hand with universal reduction and elimination of weapons (WILPF 2018), suggesting a vastly reduced (if any) role for armed forces and military alliances.

Militaries are, moreover, viewed by many feminists as an institution where hegemonic forms of masculinity privileging practices of violence and misogyny, combined with myths of heroic protection of vulnerable civilians, are produced and reproduced (see for example, Connell, 1995; Cockburn and Enloe 2012). Militarized masculinity, constructed within

militaries but with effects rippling through society, is theorised as focused upon domination of women (and subordinate males) and the denigration of the feminine (Whitworth 2004). Indeed, many scholars argue that the capacity of women within the military to be agents of change of institutional culture or of military operations is limited, as they adapt their performance of femininity to fit their hyper-masculine environment (Weinstein 1999; King 2013). They likewise question claims that women make a distinct contribution as military peacekeepers: to protection of women and girls, prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, or as role models for local women (Jennings 2011; Heineken 2015; see discussion in Duncanson and Woodward 2015). As Heineken says, ‘Clearly one cannot bring about a different perspective to war and peace if women [in the military] are expected to embrace masculine norms and values and where gender difference is not recognised and valued’ (Heineken 2017, 364).

As such, it is unsurprising that some feminist scholars and activists are sceptical of military engagement with the Women, Peace and Security agenda. They suggest that when taken up by militaries, the Women, Peace and Security agenda risks being used to lend legitimacy to the ‘war system’ rather than challenge it (Cohn 2008; Cockburn 2012; Otto 2016), even ‘militarizing feminism’ (Wright 2015). NATO is regarded with particular suspicion; by ‘Women Against NATO’ as ‘an ambitious, expansionist and belligerent war-machine, primarily serving the economic and strategic interests of the more powerful among its member states’ (Cockburn 2012, 50). From this perspective, NATO invoking women’s rights is not progress, but the co-optation of feminism for militarist ends. More specifically, some feminists allege that NATO’s gender work too often carries the implication that gender is only relevant for the host country, as if western institutions had achieved gender equality; that it perpetuates colonial assumptions about the superiority of the west as the bearer of civilization and humanitarian values (see for example Khalili 2011; Kronsell 2012; Pratt

2013; Mesok 2015). One imagines that anti-militarist feminists would argue that Military Gender Advisors are either not-feminist or feminists wasting their time, legitimising fundamentally problematic institutions.

Conversely, a more optimistic perspective explores whether militaries can be transformed to be better able to engage with and address the security needs of women, girls and boys.

Cockburn and Hubic asked, could soldier identities and military culture be ‘regendered’: transformed *inter alia* so to allow soldiers to be more responsive and caring; to be respectful of women; to have gender on the agenda (2002, 117–8)? Duncanson and Woodward (2015) develop the implications of such regendering as involving a disruption and deconstruction of gendered masculine/feminine hierarchies in ways that could enable militaries to contribute to feminist visions of security. Advocating for regendering of militaries builds on the accounts of feminists, such as Mary Katzenstein (1999), who have been attentive to the small gains won by women within the military over decades of protest. It considers, also, that many militaries have shifted focus in the post-Cold War period from wars of national defence to support for peace and security (Kronsell 2012; Moskos et al. 2000). This arguably opens opportunities for new approaches to all aspects of military culture and activity. More urgently, where there are situations of such dire insecurity that local men and women actively ask for and support an international military presence (as Cockburn and Hubic noted to be the case in Bosnia Herzegovina, for example), and where militaries are actively reaching out to local women, we argue that they deserve our attention and critical encouragement. We argue that there is potential for militaries to contribute to women’s security in communities in which they are deployed, and to become more invested in and capable of facilitating feminist visions of security. Is this optimism or naivety? The reader will judge. In doing so, the experiences and perceptions of Military Gender Advisors, we argue, contribute missing and important evidence.

## **Why explore Military Gender Advisors' perspectives?**

A central strategy of feminist methodology is woman-centredness as a political and intellectual approach. Tickner talks of using women's experiences of an indicator of the 'reality' against which research questions are formulated (cited in Ackerley et al., 2006, 26). We feel that this demands that the experiences of military women are listened to in researching military roles in relation to Women, Peace and Security. Other scholars exploring military engagements with Women, Peace and Security have touched upon the work of Military Gender Advisors. Their insights guided and enriched our research and are incorporated into our discussion of our findings. Scholarship to date, however, has been limited to research with Gender Advisors from the Netherlands (Kesteloo 2015) or Sweden (*Operational Effectiveness and UN Resolution 1325* 2009; Egnell, Hojem, and Berts 2012; Longworth and Engdahl, 2014) or with a very small sample (Hurley, 2016). Lackenbauer and Langlais' key *Review of the Practical Implications of UNSCR 1325 for the Conduct of NATO-led Operations and Missions* (2013) was commissioned by NATO and led by the entity responsible for training of NATO Gender Advisors, which might mitigate against Gender Advisors being frankly critical of themselves or their institutional arrangements. Indeed, there is a dissonance between the largely encouraging 'official' NATO version of Gender Advisors' impact, and more pessimistic accounts emerging from independent scholars. As such, research conducted under more robustly anonymous conditions was needed, as well as research drawing upon a wider pool of nations.

This research involves 21 participants: 19 former or current Military Gender Advisors or Gender Field Advisors, plus two individuals with similar roles in military headquarters. They are from four NATO member militaries and two NATO Partner militaries. 16 had been deployed as part of NATO operations in Afghanistan between 2009 and mid-2016; one

deployed as part of the Kosovo Force (KFOR); two were based in permanent NATO commands in Europe; and two were based in national military headquarters. Of the 16 who had been in Afghanistan, at least four continued to work on gender issues in their military institutions at home. As such, this sample captures experiences of being a Gender Advisor in national and operational headquarters, and in the field, with three quarters of the sample speaking predominately about experiences in Afghanistan. 18 participants were female, three male; 19 were uniformed military personnel; two were civilians working within military structures. Participants were initially approached and identified through our professional networks, and from these initial contacts, snowball sampling. 11 were interviewed between February 2015 and June 2016; the other 10 were a group of Gender Advisors who came together in September 2016 to reflect upon their experiences. Because the community of Military Gender Advisors remains small and many of our participants continue to work with their militaries, we committed to keep confidential both their name (by using pseudonyms) and their armed force.

Whilst the sample for this research is modest, it offers analysis of the experience of Gender Advisors from a more diverse range of nations and operational contexts, and over a longer period than existing research. At a critical juncture in the development of Gender Advisor functions within NATO and Partner militaries, it offered Gender Advisors safe space in which to reflect deeply upon their role. The following presentation and discussion of findings from our interviews and observation focuses upon Gender Advisors' *goals*, and what they considered their *achievements* and *challenges*. While Gender Advisors themselves cannot speak to their success at achieving the goals of the Women, Peace and Security agenda in any conclusive sense – their perceptions are necessarily partial and subjective - they are well-placed to offer observations about the extent to which they and their roles have made a difference. What they had to say we found, at times, surprising, troubling and humbling.

## **The role and goals of NATO Military Gender Advisors**

UN peacekeeping missions have had gender advisors since 2000, but traditionally civilians, working closely with human rights elements of the mission. 2006 saw the first appointment of a Gender Advisor within the military structure of a European Union multinational operation (EU Operation Headquarters 2006), and NATO shortly after adopted the Gender Advisor function. Since 2008, NATO Gender Advisors have been deployed in Afghanistan as part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and then Resolute Support Mission, and since late 2010 also in KFOR. As a snapshot: during 2016, there were 33 Gender Advisors deployed in NATO operations or missions; plus 24 part-time Gender Advisors (Gender Focal Points) within the headquarters of Resolute Support Mission and 63 in the KFOR headquarters and subordinate units (NATO Public Diplomacy Division 2017, 59).

This section presents how the role of Military Gender Advisor has evolved within NATO operations and structures, and what their goals are formally conceived to be, considering how they align with those of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. It then draws out how the Military Gender Advisors we interviewed and observed themselves understand their goals.

### **Evolution of the Gender Advisor role and its formal goals**

The first NATO Gender Advisors were deployed by Sweden in July 2008 and by Norway in 2009, each to their nation's Provincial Reconstruction Team in Afghanistan. These Military Gender Advisors had both 'internal' and 'external' roles: that is, advising the commander and supporting analysis and planning within the Provincial Reconstruction Team, and cultivating external contacts with Afghan women. The Gender Advisor role was institutionalised within NATO in the September 2009 *Bi-Strategic Command Directive 40-1*. This envisioned Gender

Advisors in both NATO command headquarters and in operations (at the time, the largest being in Afghanistan and Kosovo), missions and exercises. Gender Advisors' role was to 'ensure integration and a common understanding of UNSCR 1325 and gender dimensions' (NATO 2009, paras. 1–11) and 'to provide expertise on UNSCR 1325, women and gender perspectives, and cultural awareness' (para 1-9. b.) The Directive presented a confusing mix of terminology (integrating gender dimensions, gender awareness, gender perspective, female perspectives, gender equality), jumbling together ideas around female personnel bringing distinctive perspectives to NATO operations, and 'gender perspective' in terms of gender analysis of an operational context. A vast array of responsibilities for the Gender Advisor was specified. They were to assist commanders in planning, conduct and evaluation of operations; input into meetings and reviews; and conduct gender and UNSCR 1325 assessments. They were to establish a system of gender education and training. They were to be involved in internal human resources; standards of conduct; intelligence and medical and logistics aspects. They were to establish and maintain contacts with NATO gender structures, international organisations, and international and local NGOs. In an organisation where functional specialisation is the norm, expecting one individual's skills, knowledge and capacities to span so widely is extraordinary. Early analysis of the work of Swedish Gender Field Advisors indeed observed that the wide-ranging areas in which the mission needed gender expertise could place an unreasonable workload on one person (Olsson and Tejpar 2009). The Directive specified that Gender Advisors should have 'gender expertise' and be



trained and qualified, although at that time no specific training or qualifications existed.<sup>6</sup> In terms of how the Gender Advisors' role contributes to the goals of UNSCR 1325 outlined above, there is an emphasis on women's *participation* as NATO personnel; but not on promoting participation and empowerment of local women. There is a focus on *protecting* women and girls from violence, including sexual violence, with oblique references to protection from, and prevention of, sexual exploitation and abuse by NATO personnel. However, the 'operational effectiveness' framing is dominant. For example, the Directive's illustration of a Gender Advisor's 'gender and UNSCR 1325 assessments' is of 'cultural issues which may impact operations effectiveness, intelligence, etc.' (para 1-11. h.), rather than of using an assessment to prevent violence or to protect someone.

NATO Gender Advisors' roles were reconfigured in an August 2012 revision of *Bi-Strategic Directive 40-1* (NATO 2012). The revised Directive rationalized somewhat its concepts to emphasise 'integration of gender perspective'; described as assessing the differences between women and men, as reflected in social roles, distribution of power and access to resources, with the aim of considering their needs and how the activities of NATO have different effects on them (para 1-4. c.). Moreover, it is specified that 'integration of gender perspective' follows gender analysis, defined as: 'systematic gathering and examination of information on gender differences and social relations in order to identify and understand inequities based on

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<sup>6</sup> The Swedish Armed Forces offered a Gender Advisor course to international participants from October 2009, but this was not NATO certified until 2011. An e-learning course on gender perspectives for personnel deploying to ISAF was launched in late 2010.

gender' (para 1-4. d.) Mandatory and recommended training paths for Gender Advisors working at strategic, operational or tactical levels were specified, combining a newly developed e-learning course for Gender Advisors, classroom learning at the new Nordic Centre for Gender in Military Operations in Sweden, and participation in military exercises. Gender Advisors' areas of responsibility expanded further, to encompass conflict-related sexual violence, engaging with child rights organisations, and conducting 'frequent and flexible engagement' not only with local women but with local men (NATO 2012, A-2). Further new tasks included: supporting recruitment and retention of women in local security forces; supporting investigations of alleged violence or sexual abuse by NATO personnel; advising on gender dimensions in the local judicial system; ensuring women were part of NATO's regular force structure; advising on national pre-deployment training; and advising on how buildings and communications structures within military compounds might impact upon gender relations. The access that a Gender Advisor needs to do their job is better specified: they should have direct access to the Commander, always be a member of a planning group, and be able to advise wherever they consider it appropriate.

A third iteration of *Bi-Strategic Directive 40-1 on Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325 and Gender Perspective* was agreed in May 2017. This appears to reorient the Gender Advisor's role as primarily guidance and coordination, with an emphasis on reporting and analysis. The dizzying array of tasks in earlier versions of the Directive are now identified as the responsibilities of the staff working in those areas. However they remain embedded in the chapter of the Directive listing the Gender Advisor's functions, with frequent references to the Gender Advisor ensuring or supporting the work (NATO ACO ACT 2017, 19–20). NATO's understanding of a Gender Advisor's role is now summarised as, '... to raise awareness of the different needs and contributions of women, men, girls and boys in a conflict or post-conflict environment' (NATO Public Diplomacy Division 2017,

59). One thus sees a stronger recognition of the *participation* element of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda.

### **Gender Advisors' Understanding of their Role and Goals**

In describing their goals as Gender Advisors, some emphasised the formal goals of their job description, others spoke more personally about their individual motivations. Some emphasised what we would understand as institutional gender mainstreaming: incorporating gender in the mission or organisation's own policies, processes and training. Nonetheless, almost all described their goals in terms of improving things for women in areas of conflict, in a manner that maps onto the priorities of the Women, Peace and Security agenda: protection of women, including against gender-based violence; participation of women and incorporation of their views in reconstruction and in the security sector; and generally improving women's opportunities, rights and life conditions.

*I am convinced that I work for a good purpose, especially the goals of 1325: a better protection of women and children in the (post) conflict zones and giving them a voice and make the world listen to them, by trying to give them the opportunities to participate in the peace processes and reconstruction of their country (Veronica)*

A minority articulated their goals in instrumentalist terms. William, for example, argued that improving things for women will make a society less likely to harbour insurgents. This framing was far from dominant, however.

Most Gender Advisors expressed a striking personal committed to the goals of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. Some described it as having become a vocation: 'I felt like 'I've

come home, I've actually found what I think I was destined to do'' (Wendy). Many explicitly identified as feminists. Carla and Marco drew a distinction between working on gender or equal opportunities, and feminism, placing them in the category of 'feminists by any other name' (as Katzenstein (1999) described the military women in her study of feminist protest within institutions, who rejected the label but who were clearly committed to feminist goals). Gender Advisors' feminism ranged from what might be considered liberal feminism, concerned with promoting equality of opportunity for women, to a more radical, transformational vision.

*I am so much a feminist ... they would be horrified if they knew how much I'm a feminist. [Laughing] Then they wouldn't let me into the, you know, the closed zones. (Agnes)*

*I have to share or give away from some of the power I have as a man. (William)*

Most of our interviewees did describe using arguments around how gender perspectives improve mission effectiveness in communicating their work, the fusion of military effectiveness goals and the feminist-inspired Women, Peace and Security goals in a similar manner to NATO's policy framework. They did not see these goals as in tension with each other; rather a win-win situation. Gender Advisor's trust in their national military's and NATO's goals as to bring stability and security to other nations, of course, reveals the different worldviews that divide feminists in the military from feminist antimilitarists.

### **Military Gender Advisors' achievements**

NATO's own external presentation of the work of its Gender Advisors is largely extremely positive (cited in Coomaraswamy 2015, 258; see also *Whose Security? Practical examples of gender perspectives in military operations* 2015). The most comprehensive reviews of their work have been upbeat overall. Egnell, Hojem, and Berts' presented Gender Advisors' as having 'made a gender perspective a real and permanent feature of Swedish contributions to international operations' (2012, vi: see also Lackenbauer and Langlais 2013, 35–6; *Operational Effectiveness and UN Resolution 1325 - Practices and Lessons from Afghanistan*, 2009). We asked Gender Advisors what they felt had been their key successes. Their responses are scrutinised in two directions.: first, internal: in terms of changing mindsets within their military structures as regards women and the relevance of gender (an aspect of regendering, discussed above) and changing their colleagues' working practices; second, external: in terms of impacts upon communities - improving security for women and men, and increasing women's participation.

### ***Changes in military practice and mindsets***

Overwhelmingly, Gender Advisors tended to describe their success in terms of 'institutionalisation' and 'integration' of procedures to include gender perspectives. The Gender Advisors generally conveyed a sense of slow but steady progress in acceptance of the relevance of gender to militaries, and processes to facilitate consideration of it in military operations. Lackenbauer and Langlais' 2013 review had found that ISAF Gender Advisors had little structure for their work, having to decide on their own focus and tasks. The more recently deployed Gender Advisors we interviewed described established processes for Gender Advisors' engagement in planning, identification of goals and indicators; more access to command; and fuller staffing of Gender Advisor posts. Those who been involved in the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, which commenced in January 2015, described

gender as integrated in the Mission's indicators and reporting mechanisms; operational plans and standard operating procedures; facilities, activities, budgets; and focusing not only upon women but upon influencing men.

Some Gender Advisors describe a key mark of progress as the recognition by the command that integrating gender perspective is *their* responsibility, advised and supported by their Gender Advisor, rather than the responsibility of the Gender Advisor.

*When it started in 2008 ... they put a lot of responsibility on the Gender Field Advisor. And then it was very easy to criticise the work because it's very difficult to be successful if you're, like, alone and ... no one really knows what is this about ... now the organisation has a full understanding and acceptance of this, and that is that the work of integrating a gender perspective should always be the Commander's ... So absolutely, absolutely it has evolved. (Agnes)*

Another ISAF Gender Advisor recounted being in a senior staff meeting in which the commander asked who was going to a conference organised by Afghan women. When eyes slid to the Gender Advisor, the commander said, *'I am on board. We will push this button. And if I do it, you have to do it too'* (meaning they all had to go to the conference). Although describing gender as a 'button' raises questions, the Gender Advisor interpreted this as the commander reiterating the importance for all parts of the Mission of engaging with Afghan women. As evidence of institutionalisation through the headquarters or operation, a number of Gender Advisors described colleagues independently including gender in planning documents or analyses. Many highlighted changing their colleagues' mindset as regard the relevance of gender.

## ***Security and women's empowerment***

A number of Gender Advisors gave examples of how their advice had been used to mitigate the harm that NATO's own activities might pose to women. Some mentioned using a gender perspective in analysing intelligence so as to mitigate 'collateral damage' in NATO targeting. One described broadening consultation with local communities to include women, so to understand what roads they used, to be able to avoid them. One spoke of 'prevent[ing] an American General killing some women' by advising on how funding might be provided to community projects without inflaming local rivalries. Gender Advisors, however, most often described their successes as hoped-for impacts of their individual contacts with local women: having facilitated their coming together, inspiring them to join the security forces, motivating them.

*The first thing I wrote was a zero... [but] I met Afghan women and would see them six months later with burkhas off, talking to soldiers, trying to negotiate for funds ... maybe a little drop that fills up the bucket, for me, that is enough. (Workshop participant)*

*I hope that I have motivated one woman to not give up and keep fighting for women's rights. (Workshop participant)*

A number of Gender Advisors had worked to support Afghan security forces in integrating women, and felt that their advocacy with the Afghan authorities to emphasise the importance of women's participation had been successful. One talked about directly supporting female police through helping them to set up their own network; another about Gender Advisors' support to centres and protection units dealing with gender based violence. Others talked about being role models for Afghan women to join the security forces. We noticed that,

although the description of a Gender Advisor's role in *Bi-Strategic Directive 40-1* refers to gender analysis and collection of data, none identified progress by reference to measured changes in, for example, prevalence of acts of violence or community perceptions of security.<sup>7</sup> They did not claim systematic positive impacts upon the lives of communities affected by conflict or by NATO operations; rather small wins and hopeful signals.

### **Military Gender Advisors' challenges**

Previous analysis of Military Gender Advisors in NATO operations identified a range of problems: resistance by peers, inadequate resourcing for the scope of their tasks, and lack of authority to fulfil their responsibilities (Egnell et al., 2012; Lackenbauer and Langlais, 2013; Kesteloo, 2015). NATO insiders questioned whether one individual could have all the skills and knowledge to meet the very broad requirements of the role (Prescott, 2013, p. 58), and whether the ISAF Gender Advisors' understanding of local gender dynamics was adequate (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, 2014). From interviewing Dutch Gender Advisors, Kesteloo concluded that they were 'shunned and found irrelevant to the conduct of the operation,' their lack of technical knowledge and inability to enforce action led them to have 'minimal' effects (2015, pp. 29, 33). We asked Gender Advisors to reflect upon the challenges to their work. They key issues they highlighted were colleagues' resistance to accepting gender as relevant,

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<sup>7</sup> NATO commentators on drafts of this paper highlighted the *Gender Functional Planning Guide* published in July 2015 to improve gender analysis, and that Periodic Mission Reviews in ISAF, KFOR and Resolution Support Missions have been supposed to include gender analysis. Just one of our interviewees mentioned periodic gender reporting within Resolution Support Mission.



inadequate resources and, in mission, incomplete understanding of their context. Collectively these contributed to frustration amongst some with the military's gender work being magnified for political ends, whilst concrete achievements were few and fragile.

### ***Resistance***

All of our respondents, when asked about the key challenges they face, highlighted resistance, including but not limited to lack of command support – the quality of which seemed to be entirely dependent upon the personality and inclination of each commander. Within missions, resistance manifested in varied ways: refusing to meet with the Gender Advisor, failing to put the Gender Advisor on invitation lists for meetings or distribution lists for documents, refusing to provide security and logistics support, or disparaging their work. The perceived roots of resistance were myriad. Some said that colleagues perceived having female advisors was insensitive to Afghan culture. Fiona described the assumption that a Gender Advisor was there to 'bang on about women's issues'. Gender Advisors continually confronted a lack of understanding of the relevance of gender to the mission's activities, summed by Wendy as: 'We don't need to know about women and equality and stuff 'cause we just go and kill people and we're only interested in traditional warfare.' In national headquarters, resistance manifested in persistent gaps between policy and education, and operationalizing.

*... we can have, you know, a few champions, ... We can have money. We can have the political documents being there. But whenever people ask, 'Well, give me an example of how you've implemented this in your armed forces,' I can't say anything ... how we've achieved something in a military operation ... I don't have a single example. (Kristin)*

Many Gender Advisors felt that talking about gender equality is, of itself, perceived as threatening by military audiences. Some spoke about the masculine culture within the military, and resistance to the special status and privileges attached to elite males in the military being threatened.

*The people that don't support it and don't like it ... 'cause they wonder how it's gonna affect them, how it's gonna disenfranchise them. How it's gonna take their power away (Fiona)*

### **Resources**

A key resource constraint is that many Gender Advisor positions within NATO remain unfilled; described by one Gender Advisor as illustrating the gap between real and stated political commitment. In Afghanistan, scarcity of translators, female interpreters and transport and protection to move around outside their compounds meant that many Gender Advisors had little access to the local women and men, senior female Afghan personnel and international organisations they were directed to engage.

*I had a couple of meetings with sort of Afghan women police, but apart from that I didn't have the engagement with the locals that I would have liked to have had, which I think would have helped me to inform more about what we should be trying to do to support security sector reform. (Wendy)*

They did not have budget for projects to assist local women. These were challenges identified by Egnell, Hojem, and Berts and in Lackenbauer and Langlais' 2013 review, clearly persisting. They suggest continuing mismatch between the scope of the Gender Advisor role as defined by NATO, and the commitment of resources to it.

### ***Limited technical gender skills and understanding of the local context***

As well as precluding the external engagement aspect of their role, lack of mobility made it extremely difficult for the Gender Advisors in Afghanistan to analyse gendered security needs. This contributed, for many, to a broad sense of being underinformed and unprepared. While we interviewed only one Gender Advisor working in Kosovo, contrastingly, she described having developed a contact network with local women's NGOs and individual women. The workshop participants who had deployed to Afghanistan as Gender Advisors over both ISAF and Resolute Support Mission complained that they had received insufficient intelligence and cultural briefings. They were aware that they lacked knowledge about the role of femininities and masculinities in Afghan culture, and the dangers and risks in approaching issues, feeling themselves 'sent there blind'. They described potential unintended consequences of NATO's gender initiatives, such as women encouraged to join the Afghan security forces being put at risk of sexual harassment or abuse, and backlash against female police personnel given special training opportunities. William likewise described how Afghan women highlighted the risks of their engagement with NATO:

*They told us, with us pinpointing ... Key Leaders amongst the women, we actually made things worse because they thought that we gave them Western ideas and a Western way of looking at democracy ... Some of the women would also be afraid that when we leave ... with them being targeted especially meant that they would actually get much worse when we leave ... It's my firm belief still that we never actually understood the complexity of the situation in Afghanistan. And we have tried to make the best of it. (William)*

The workshop participants recognised that reports from international organisations might have been a useful source of information about gender issues in Afghanistan, but were left to find these for themselves; doing so was time consuming and they did not know where to look. They did not have the time nor budget to formally request such information through military channels.

Gender Advisors are not, like cultural analysts within some militaries, anthropologists, nor have they local language skills. The Gender Advisors in this study described having highly varied levels of formal education and training on concepts linked to gender and sexual discrimination, legal frameworks, approaches to and tools for gender analysis: from none, to having completed university courses on gender or Women, Peace and Security. None mentioned prior experience of conducting gender analysis in conflict-affected countries. Only some of the Gender Advisors had done NATO's officially required Gender Advisor training (which NATO apparently cannot enforce). Even for those who had, this is not mission-specific. Although some mentioned knowing nothing about gender before they started, they generally conveyed confidence that the associated skills could be self-taught or picked up on the job. Although very satisfied with his gender work, Marco came closest to identifying a lack of technical skills for gender work within NATO structures and missions. He described a gap between individuals having 'gender perspective' – awareness of gender as an analytical lens - and having 'gender capacity' as a staff function, including a capacity to plan; and further education being needed to progress from one to the other.

These challenges around ability to engage with communities, understanding of context, training and skills reinforce Azarbaijani-Moghaddam's critique of early ISAF Gender Advisors. As a civilian cultural advisor to ISAF, her observations were that the Gender Advisors lacked the skills to conduct gender analysis of the institutions with which they

worked, and the complexities of their operational environment, that they operated at a distance from local realities. She was critical of Gender Advisors' lack of resources and the overall NATO approach to gender as 'plagued by persistent misunderstanding, mechanistic and simplistic assumptions' and 'complete ignorance of the time, personnel, technical skills, qualifications, analytical skills and experience required to undertake meaningful gender interventions' (2014, 22).

### ***The gap between rhetoric and reality***

In describing achievements above, we highlighted how some Gender Advisors perceived steady progress in institutionalisation. Others were pessimistic about the institutionalisation of gender perspectives, describing them as partial and lacking within their national structures. They emphasize the exceptional nature of gender work: they were deployed without what they considered proper briefing and training, and not asked to do the usual end-of-tour reporting on return to their home military. Inga emphasised that systems to integrate gender are still fragile, with good practices vulnerable to being 'lost'. There was a degree of cynicism among some Gender Advisors, who expressed frustration at gender being used to make a person, institution or nation 'look good' without due recognition of the resistance and shortcomings.

*I think that there is this big problem with speaking only about the good things ... and I think many people working with gender, we try to not to speak so much about the resistance we meet because, because that might spill over on ourselves. ... Doing things to make things look good, you know. That's, sort of, an objective itself ... This political blah, blah, blah, talked about this like we are fantastic, and it is fantastic, and you know, it isn't so fantastic. (Inga)*

*... When they want to do some kind of co-operation with other countries this is an issue easy to develop, not very expensive, which gives a lot of visibility.*

*(Philip)*

Those working on gender in national headquarters often highlighted the gap between policy and the implementation of commitments to gender mainstreaming and Women, Peace and Security. Like Inga above, a number attributed the slow progress, both at NATO and national levels, to institutionalise, develop and resource gender work to a lack of real value attached to gender mainstreaming in military operations.

## **Conclusions**

*There are always gender advisors that have gone back to their office and been crying in frustration ... But it's getting better though. (Hanna)*

This paper explores whether and how Military Gender Advisors may be catalysing change in militaries and military operations; change, in terms of the feminist goals motivating and channelled through the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. Many Gender Advisors expressed their goals in terms of women's security, rights, opportunities and participation in conflict-affected areas, echoing feminist aims. This is encouraging, given the instrumentalist framing of Women, Peace and Security in NATO's policy and operational directives. The Gender Advisors we spoke to were, in the most, attentive to quite complex understandings of gender as a power relation. Some were familiar with and thoughtful as regards feminist critiques of militarism. Prominent was a strong awareness of the need for gender change not only in the countries to which they deployed, but also in their own militaries and societies, and dissatisfaction as to the pace of this change.

The scope of Gender Advisors' task is huge, and the challenges that they speak of – the resistance, the lack of resources, and their rudimentary preparation – are extensive and pervasive. Many Gender Advisors did, nonetheless, share encouraging stories of small successes in supporting local women, which should not be disregarded. Gender Advisors saw their clearest successes in the institutionalisation of gender in the mission or headquarters. To understand how these measures in turn impact upon local people's security and women's participation would require a different research methodology, such as impact evaluation.<sup>8</sup> However, what measures to institutionalise do signify, and the Gender Advisors testify to, is some change in mindsets amongst colleagues: a growing understanding of gender analysis and women's roles as significant to security, and a willingness to think about gender in doing their work. We see this as positive, if modest, indications of regendering – sparks of regendering - having gender on the agenda and caring about women, in the terms described by Cockburn and Hubic.

It should not be overlooked, however, that some of the successes identified by Gender Advisors illustrate the tensions between feminist visions of Women, Peace and Security and military applications. The protection element of Gender Advisors' work was primarily described in terms of mitigating risks from NATO patrols and shelling. Where Gender Advisors are engaged in promoting women's involvement in national security services, but where women and men working in those institutions are unprotected from harassment and

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<sup>8</sup> Noting that NATO's Civil Society Advisory Panel on Women, Peace and Security is advocating that NATO conduct regular impact assessments of its Women, Peace and Security work and gendered impact assessments of NATO operations and missions (Civil Society Advisory Panel on Women Peace and Security 2017, 22).

abuse, is this success, and if so, for whom and at whose cost? Likewise, the suggestion that NATO's identification of certain Afghan women as 'key leaders' put them at risk of reprisal illustrates the sensitivity and care with which military engagement with civil society and interventions concerning women's rights must be designed. The Gender Advisors in Afghanistan, however, described only the most general knowledge of local gender roles and relations and gendered insecurities, and were generally denied the necessary resources to acquire this knowledge. None of the Gender Advisors described any structured approach to understanding the cultural, political and economic context of their work, such as conducting assessments of security issues, consultation on specific topics, or seeking baseline data from secondary sources. These shortcomings could be interpreted, in the tradition of feminist antimilitarism, as evidence that militaries will *never* have the skill sets needed for effective gender work, and should leave it to civilian agencies, NGOs and the like. Alternatively, if advocating for regendered, better militaries, as evidence that militaries need new types of education and training (including comprehensive technical training on approaches and tools for gender mainstreaming), and considerable increases in resources, to be fit for purpose for contemporary peacekeeping, stabilisation, and training missions. Making such changes, however, would require will within NATO as an institution and at national level to confront the current gaps between rhetoric and reality.

Anti-militarist feminists make compelling arguments, revealing and challenging assumptions about the inevitability and legitimacy of military responses to complex challenges and insecurities. Their assumption that militaries cannot become more able to tackle these insecurities we find too pessimistic, however, in view of the indications in our research that Military Gender Advisors *can* be agents of institutional change, given at least basic institutional support. They can, as they reported to us, change mindsets on an individual level, initiating conversations about equality and discrimination, challenging colleagues as to their



attitudes. Moreover, they can, and have, introduced innovations in processes and practices that direct attention to the specific needs of women, girls and boys in conflict, and how military interventions might affect them. Military Gender Advisors' achievements may be modest; yet this is how change happens in large institutions: incrementally. The Gender Advisors we spoke with appeared to us as feminists operating at the margins to try and force openings for change, adapting their strategies to navigate obstacles, maintaining commitment in the face of repudiation. Military Gender Advisors resemble how feminists within other bureaucracies operate facing the challenge of transforming huge, gendered institutions as a small minority of 'institutional entrepreneurs,' or change agents (Caglar et al, 2013; Eyben and Turquet 2013). In viewing the potential for such change within militaries and military operations optimistically, we are mindful of the inevitability of 'small wins' when feminist insiders seek to change established institutions. Far from feminists wasting their time, Military Gender Advisors are clawing their institutions forward, toward better alignment with the vision of the Women, Peace and Security agenda, and toward being more attentive to power dynamics between men and women, both their own and in society. While cognisant that this alone will not achieve the transformative vision of feminist peace, without war, whilst we still have a world where militaries are being used to address profound insecurity, Military Gender Advisors may help militaries to do this better.

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