3 Changing the Armed Forces

The process of implementing a gender perspective in the Swedish Armed Forces is far from complete. While it has been an uphill struggle, a number of notable successes have already been achieved – especially in comparison with most other military organizations around the world. This chapter provides a detailed overview of how organizational change within the Swedish Armed Forces occurred for the purpose of implementing UNSCR 1325 in order to develop capacity for applying a gender perspective in the conduct of military operations. Particular emphasis is placed on the underlying strategy that guided the process. While the chapter is not completely limited to being descriptive, the main evaluation of this process is provided in chapter five. Let us nevertheless first provide a brief introduction to the case of the Swedish Armed Forces.

The Swedish Armed Forces – a background

It is necessary to discuss the national and organizational context of the Swedish case in order for it to be fully intelligible for an international audience. The increased knowledge that comes from the background information on this case is also important in order to determine its generalizability. Which lessons and experiences are relevant for other actors? Indeed, the Swedish case has its peculiarities – especially in the structure of its civil-military relations. This section therefore provides a brief description of the history and politics of the Swedish Armed Forces, as well the general process of transformation it has gone through since the end of the Cold War.

While Sweden is a frequent troop contributor to military operations within the EU framework as well as to NATO, it is still non-aligned and has been so for two centuries. Sweden’s neutrality policy originated as a
consequence of its involvement in the Napoleonic Wars of the 18th and 19th centuries, during which a third of the country’s territory was lost. The neutrality policy served Sweden well during the twentieth century by keeping Sweden out of both World Wars. In fact, Sweden has enjoyed more than 200 consecutive years without war. Except for active engagement in international peace operations from the early UN peacekeeping operations in the Sinai, the Congo, and Lebanon, through the millennial operations in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Liberia, to the most recent operations in Afghanistan and Libya, the military instrument has not been used or tested.

Being a small, non-aligned country geographically wedged in between NATO and the Soviet Union nevertheless meant that Sweden considered it necessary to create a very strong defence organization, both civilian and military. The military defence was based on universal male conscription, and during the Cold War virtually all males between 18 and 48 years of age were assigned to a unit in the regular Army, Air Force, or Navy, the territorial army, or the ‘Home Guard’, an irregular defence organization modeled after the Yugoslav Partisans. The Home Guard involved roughly 120,000 volunteers in small units all around the country. Most of the civilian segment of society also had important rehearsed roles to play in case of war. There were civil defence units all over the country, shelters constructed beneath every large building, and gas-masks for every Swedish citizen. Most factories had alternative production plans for war.

As a self-reliant small power, Sweden also developed a defence industry that not only catered to the Swedish defence, but also produced large amounts of materiel for export. Sweden is currently the world’s largest weapons exporter per capita, exporting everything from small arms and artillery guns to armoured vehicles and fighter jets. In sum, Sweden was highly militarized, with the year of national military service – appropriately called ‘the duty to serve’ in Swedish – built into the very fabric of Swedish society. The duty to serve was not only seen as an important contribution to Swedish defence, but was also socialized within every Swedish male citizen. It was so deeply engrained that anthropologists would probably have considered it to be a rite of passage.

Sweden’s defence doctrine was ‘absolute’, meaning that the idea was to never surrender under any circumstances. The phone directory that was delivered to every Swedish home had a small section titled ‘If War Comes’. It informed the population about what to do in case of invasion, and the most important message was ‘[w]e will never surrender! Any message to the contrary is false!’ This meant that the entire Swedish