

A Review of Danish Literature on Women in PME and Auto-Ethnographic Reflections on Dynamics Influencing Research Output in the Field

Anna Sofie Schøning

This article set out to review existing Danish literature on women's representation in Professional Military Education (PME), particularly at the officer level. However, very little peer-reviewed research exists in this area—an absence that prompted deeper inquiry. Combining literature review of existing research on gender and the military in Denmark with auto-ethnographic reflection, the article explores cultural and institutional explanations for this research gap. It situates the Danish context within broader Scandinavian trends, noting that Denmark lags behind Norway and Sweden in regards to scholarly output on gender in military settings. Drawing from the author's experience as a civilian academic in PME, the article reflects on how professional expectations, disciplinary norms, and the desire for legitimacy shape research choices—particularly for women. These reflections align with existing research on gendered dynamics in the Danish military, where for instance visibility because of being a woman is not always wanted. The article argues that understanding the absence of research is, in itself, an important step and that increased scholarly attention to gender and representation in PME is needed.

Effectively 1 July 2025 conscription in Denmark will include women, thereby lifting the last formal restriction for equal access to the Danish Defence.¹ Until this point in time, Danish women could volunteer for conscription but unlike men, they were not legally bound to serve and could drop out at any point without facing any consequences. Since Danish women were granted the right to serve as conscripts on a volunteer basis in 1998, there has been an increased focus on female representation in the Danish Armed Forces. This has only been amplified in the last years. A contributing factor is the increased attention within the Danish Armed Forces to securing adequate recruitment and retention of personnel. This has been a known challenge for the armed forces since the 1990s, where it became clear that demographic changes would make competition for eligible young people greater.² Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the subsequent need for expansion of the Danish Defence only increased the need for more eligible

¹ Forsvarsministeret, "Fuld ligestilling til værnepligten fremrykkes" <https://www.fmn.dk/da/nyheder/2025/fuld-ligestilling-i-varnepligten-fremrykkes/>

² Schøning, "Kampen mellem teori og praksis", p. 14.



personnel.³ Despite a rise in the number of female conscripts to around 25 percent in recent years, this has yet to result in a corresponding increase in female officers, indicating a leaking pipeline.⁴

At the outset of this article, my intention was to review Danish literature on female representation in Professional Military Education (PME) with a focus on officer education. My initial focus on female representation within PME was driven by two considerations. First, officer education is the area in which I have developed expertise, having taught and conducted research in the field over the past seven years. Secondly, I expected that a review article with this topic would address a gap in the existing literature. However, as my research progressed, it became evident that even by writing on this field would be breaking new ground. There was no existing body of research literature to be found. Broadening the scope to gender perspectives on the Danish Armed Forces revealed a growing field of research, but it is still far less developed than comparable research in neighboring countries such as Sweden and Norway.⁵ However, reading this literature I uncovered some explanations that can help explain the lack of research on female representation in PME. Hence what I intend to do in this article is present a review of the existing literature on female representation in the Danish Armed Forces and use this literature and auto-ethnographic reflections on the topic to try to explain why not more literature exist in Denmark on the field of women in PME.

Literature on women in the Danish Armed Forces

The body of literature addressing female representation in the Danish Armed Forces remains relatively limited; however, scholarly interest in the field has grown over the past decade. A comprehensive bibliographic review conducted in 2012 by Trond Svela Sand and Kari Fasting from the Norwegian school of Sport Sciences examining gender perspectives in the Scandinavian Armed Forces, identified 226 relevant publications across the region, of which only 41 originated from Denmark.⁶ As in the broader Scandinavian context, the majority of Danish contributions were commissioned by or produced in collaboration with the Danish Defence or other governmental institutions. Notably, nine of the Danish publications were graduate theses from national universities, while only three appeared as journal articles, of which only one was peer-reviewed, indicating that, at the time, independent academic research in this area was virtually nonexistent.⁷

Since 2012 research on gender, and for the purpose of this review, female perspectives has seen significant growth. However, this growth remains modest when viewed in light of the previously low baseline. Ten articles in peer reviewed journals have been published.⁸ An example

³ Forsvarsministeret, "Fuld ligestilling til værnepligten fremrykkes" <https://www.fmn.dk/da/nyheder/2025/fuld-ligestilling-i-varnepligten-fremrykkes/>

⁴ KVINFO, "Køn, Minoriteter og Kultur i Hæren", p. 4.

⁵ Bennike, "We don't see gender only soldiers," p. 266

⁶ Sand and Fasting, "Gender and Military Issues in the Scandinavian Countries." p. 7.

⁷ Sand and Fasting, "Gender and Military Issues in the Scandinavian Countries." p. 16.

⁸ Haugegaard, "Female Specialists as Operational Enablers for Special Operations Forces?"; Rosamond & Kronsell "Cosmopolitan militaries and dialogic peacekeeping."; Kyed et. Al, "Homecoming as a Gendered Practice in Danish Military Families."; Muhr & Sløk-Andersen, "Exclusion and Inclusion in the Danish Military."; Bennike & Stoltz, "Peacekeeping masculinities, intersectionality, and gender equality."; Heiselberg, "Operation 'Long Distance Parenting'."; Lilleaas, Ellingsen & Sløk-Andersen, "Humorens tvetydige funksjon: Hva kjennetegner humor som kan fungere ekskluderende i tradisjonelle mannsbastioner?"; Nielsen, "Fighting to Become One of the Boys." Madsen et.

of this is a 2018 special issue of the Danish multidisciplinary peer reviewed Journal, *Women, Gender & Research*, published a special issue on “Gender, War and the Military”. Out of eight articles two had a Danish point of view. One investigating the everyday life of (female) partners to deployed soldier’s and the second investigating how female soldiers deployed to Afghanistan experienced being gender minorities.⁹ The other articles in the special issue had Norwegian, German, Columbian or more broad international empirical focus.

Since 2012, two PhD dissertations have been published that examine female perspectives on military life. Though situated in different disciplines and employing distinct empirical approaches, both focus on how gender is included and excluded in the narratives and practices of the Danish Armed Forces. The first of these, *The Becoming of Good Soldiers – An Ethnographic Exploration of Gender and Other Obstacles in the Military Borderland* (2018), was written by ethnologist Beate Sløk-Andersen. Her dissertation investigates what it means to be perceived as a “good soldier” in the transitional space between civilian and military life, specifically within the context of conscription. As part of her ethnographic fieldwork, Sløk-Andersen embedded herself with a group of conscripts, participating in and observing their daily routines over the course of their four-month conscription period.¹⁰

The second thesis, *“We Don’t See Gender, Only Soldiers!” - Negotiating Military Identities in Narratives on Gender, Peace, and Security*, by political scientist Katrine Bjerg Bennike was defended in 2021. The PhD thesis investigates how gender is negotiated through personal, social and institutional narratives in the Danish Air force. The empirical basis for the analysis are narratives found in official documents and through interviews with men and women of ranks from private to officers working in the Danish Air force in their everyday life and when they were deployed in peace keeping mission..

Bennike identifies a pervasive discourse in the Danish Defence that can also contribute to explain the lack of research on this field, using Professor in political science Drude Dahlerups term “closed case”— meaning a problem already solved.¹¹ Included in the discourse is the understanding that because Denmark is a global frontrunner in gender equality, further attention to gender dynamics is unnecessary. As one soldier put it, “We don’t see gender, only soldiers”—a quote that became the title of Bennike’s thesis.¹² This mindset aligns with a broader Danish scepticism toward affirmative action and quota systems, and it shapes how gender is (or is not) discussed in military settings. It also creates a cultural backdrop in which raising gender issues may be seen as unnecessary or even disruptive.¹³ Interestingly Bennike shows how this blindness towards gender conflicts with an operational effectiveness argument that argues that men and women have inherently different competencies that can be used to enhance effectiveness in military

al. “Der findes kun et køn i Forsvaret.”; Knudsen and Teisen, “Negotiating Gender: Female Combat Soldiers in Denmark”.

Heiselberg, “Operation ‘Long Distance Parenting’”.⁹; Knudsen and Teisen, “Negotiating Gender: Female Combat Soldiers in Denmark”.

¹⁰ Sløk-Andersen, “The becoming of good soldiers”.

¹¹ Dahlerup, “Gender Equality as a Closed Case”, p. 193

¹² Bennike, “We don’t see gender only soldiers,” p. xix.

¹³ Bennike, “We don’t see gender only soldiers,” p. 259

operations.¹⁴ The existence of this cultural understanding in Denmark that gender is not an issue can help explain the very limited research in the field.

Nevertheless, the Danish Armed Forces continues to seek new knowledge on how to recruit and retain more women amongst its personnel and Commissioned reports or reports written by government institution remain one of the most frequent types of publication.¹⁵ An example of this is the 2025 report on gender, minorities and culture written by KVINFO, the Danish center for knowledge production for gender and equality. KVINFO had been tasked by the Danish army to help create more knowledge on why very few people of underrepresented groups wish to continue with a career in the Danish Army after end conscription.¹⁶

As seen in the above examples – both in academic research and government reports – there is a marked tendency to focus on female perspectives of the level of conscripts, non-commissioned officer, or lower-ranking professional soldiers. While some studies adopt a broader scope that includes officers, only two identified articles focused empirically on the officer level. This study examined military linguists' reflections on how gender influenced their experiences when deployed with special operations forces as cultural advisors and translators.¹⁷ The other article focused on how female and male cadets from the Army Academy navigated tensions between gender stereotypes and ideas of gender neutrality in their everyday lives.¹⁸

This pattern stands in contrast to research from Norway and Sweden, where several scholarly articles and policy reports also address gender dynamics at the officer level.¹⁹ One possible explanation for the Danish focus on lower ranks may be the literature's emphasis on recruitment and retention—processes that primarily concern enlisted personnel. However, since 2014, it has been possible to enter the Danish Army, Navy, and Air Force academies without prior military experience. At the same time, a notable decline in female representation between basic and advanced officer training highlights a significant gap in the existing research and suggests a pressing need for Danish studies that examine gender and career progression at the officer level.

An important exception to this can be found in a publication type that does not seem to have been caught in Sand and Fasting's 2012 review of Scandinavian literature on gender perspectives in the Armed Forces, namely graduate theses from Danish officer education. This outlet is likely omitted because the database where the theses can be found were not available. The theme of gender also appears to be increasingly present in theses from the Danish officer academies. Three theses include PME perspective focusing on women in officer education.²⁰ One thesis investigates how female officers balance competing demands between their understanding of what constitutes

¹⁴ Bennike, "We don't see gender only soldiers", p. 128.

¹⁵ Pristed Nielsen, "Kvindelige Veteraner".

¹⁶ KVINFO, "Køn, Minoriteter og Kultur i Hæren", p. 2

¹⁷ Haugegaard, "Female Specialists as Operational Enablers for Special Operations Forces?"

¹⁸ Madsen et al., "der findes kun et køn i Forsvaret"

¹⁹ See Pettersson, Persson & Berggren, "Changing Gender Relations.";

Estrada & Berggren, "Sexual Harassment and its Impact for Women Officer

and Cadets in the Swedish Armed Forces." ; Eid, "Kjønn og karrierevalg hos yngre offiserer."; Bergheim, Westli & Eid, "Lederutvikling i Forsvaret"

²⁰ Svop, "Børn eller krig?"; Pedersen, "Én af drengene...?" Baand, "Jeg skal kompensere...".

a 'good soldier' and a 'good mother' while being pregnant and becoming mothers in the Danish army.²¹ The third thesis studies how female Cadets at the Royal Danish Defence College experience a need to overcompensate and perform beyond expectations compared to their male counterparts.²² A common feature of the three theses is their focus is on how gender is experienced and how these experiences affects motivation for being employed in the Danish Army. None of the Army Academy theses focus specifically on the academic aspects of officer education.

As previously mentioned, one explanation for the limited literature on gender and PME could be the Special Danish discourse of gender issues being a 'closed case', and therefore not a topic requiring scholarly attention. However, even when considering international research, the topic of women in PME remains under-researched.²³ Furthermore, PME, as a field of academic inquiry, can still be considered an emerging field of academic research.²⁴ I would argue, however, that additional dynamics also contribute to the lack of literature, which I will elaborate on in the following section

Auto-ethnographic reflections

My discovery, that there is hardly any Danish research on Gender and the Danish Armed Forces – let alone Gender and PME – led me to self-reflection. I have been employed at the RDDC for a decade, and for the past five years, I have taught on the Master of Military Studies program. My primary areas of research have centred on the uses of military history in PME (advanced officer education), and the history of military thought. I could easily have written about gender perspectives on PME, but I have chosen not to, and that has been somewhat deliberate and writing this article has been a big step out of my comfort zone.

Discussions on gender can easily become politicized and divisive, which adds to the complexity of navigating such topics in professional and academic settings.²⁵ In an everyday setting it is often not easy to discern whether particular comments or questions are gender-related. In my own experience, I have previously struggled to determine whether I am being asked something because I am a woman or for other, unrelated reasons. A recurring example is the question, "Why are you interested in military history?" – a question I have been asked more times than I can recall. It is nearly impossible to know whether this inquiry stems from a perception that I do not fit the conventional image of a military historian or whether it is simply intended as a neutral conversation starter. My approach to this question is that it is the latter, because even the possibility of it being the case makes it the easiest route to go, as it could easily be me who has a stereotypical understanding of other people's expectations. These moments remind me that my own interpretations are always shaped by a consciousness of gender norms and stereotypes.

²¹ Svop, "Børn eller Krig?".

²² Baand, "Jeg skal kompensere...".

²³ Notable exceptions include: Bogacz, "Enhancing National Security"; Brown and Syme-Taylor, "Women academics and feminism in professional military education"; Brown, "Locating Feminist Progress in Professional Military Education."

²⁴ Enstad and Hagen, "No common understanding?", p. 14.

²⁵ Frederiksen and Poulsen, "Gatekeeping Science".

Teaching military history and military thought in an environment where women constitute approximately five percent of the student population, I am often the only—or one of very few—women in classrooms, faculty meetings, and other professional settings. Student evaluation research has suggested that female educators are often evaluated more critically than their male counterparts.²⁶ However, a recent Danish study of 124,752 course evaluations at a Social Science faculty at a Danish University challenges earlier assumptions of gender bias in student evaluations—namely, the idea that male educators are generally favored. The study finds no evidence of a systematic male or female bias against female educators. Instead, it indicates that students' preferences tend to follow gender affinity.²⁷ Nevertheless, these findings do not alter the fact that women in PME may be evaluated more critically than their male counterparts, when gender representation is highly imbalanced, such as the environment in which I teach.

Student evaluation is a commonly used tool in academia for assessing educator performance.²⁸ In the context of the Royal Danish Defence College, course evaluations play a significant role in informing pedagogical development and the continuous improvement of future courses. Nevertheless, in my own experience, I have not observed a tendency to receive disproportionately negative evaluations. It could be an interesting find, if it turned out that this bias does not exist in a Danish PME context, but as long as this is not investigated it is difficult to tell whether this is the norm. One possible explanation could lie in the composition of our student body, which is generally older and possesses more professional experience compared to average university students, but other explanations could be revealed that would be of relevance to research on the field.

Standing out as a woman in my professional settings is something I as mentioned have noticed, but until recently, I have tried to gloss over it. Instead, I have sought to insist that gender should not be considered a significant factor, aligning with the notion of gender as 'cold case' as mentioned in Bennike's research.²⁹ While I personally value representation and strongly believe in gender equality, I have avoided engaging with gender as a research focus or framing my work in ways that might be perceived as "feminine" or gendered. To me, reflecting on this in light of the recent research that does exist on the field has been eye-opening and made some dilemmas clear and has led me to two connected main explanations as to why I have been reluctant to do research on female perspectives of PME. The first being a desire to fit into an academic and institutional culture that privileges what could be termed "hard" subjects and a fear of being pigeonholed in regards to my primary research focus still being military history.

It has been important for me to demonstrate to my colleagues a genuine and sustained interest in military history by deliberately avoiding research areas that might be perceived as peripheral to the field or that could draw attention to my gender by aligning with stereotypical assumptions about what women typically study. My desire to be seen as academically legitimate and to "fit in" reflects broader patterns identified in a recent Danish study of female enlisted

²⁶ Mengel, Sauermann and Zölitz, "Gender Bias in Teaching Evaluations". Boring, "Gender biases in student evaluations of teaching".

²⁷ Binderkrantz and Bisgaard, "A gender affinity effect", p. 601

²⁸ Mengel, Sauermann and Zölitz, "Gender Bias in Teaching Evaluations", p. 536.

²⁹ Bennike, "We don't see gender only soldiers," p. 259;

personal with operational deployment experience. The study found that many women within the military actively resist drawing attention to their gender or being “showcased” as representatives of diversity, instead expressing a preference to be evaluated based on their professional competencies alone. One interviewee of the study described how a fellow female soldier who participated in a recruitment campaign as a female figurehead was subjected to such intense bullying that she ultimately resigned. A main recommendation in the study is therefore, that while the Danish Defence has a legitimate need to display women to increase diversity, it should simultaneously be aware that female soldiers do not always wish to be showcased, which should be accepted.³⁰ While I occupy a very different role as a civilian academic, I found this dynamic deeply relatable. My aim has been to be assessed on the merit of my work, not on the basis of my gender identity or my willingness to speak for “women”.

Another key concern has been the fear of being pigeonholed—of being seen as someone who “only” writes about gender. Bias against gender research continues to exist.³¹ An analysis of gendered research topic selection in political science, one of the dominating academic disciplines at my place of work, revealed that topics predominantly pursued by men are more frequently represented in leading academic journals³². This indicates a hierarchy of research topics that I have also heard, although in subtle ways, articulated from both some civilian and military colleagues. Within the academic setting, theoretical rigour is often prioritized, whereas in military contexts, greater value is typically placed on research that has the potential to contribute to operational effectiveness. By contrast, gender research is viewed as less rigorous, more political, or even self-serving. I have felt a subtle but persistent sense that engaging with gender might expose me to condescending remarks or assumptions about the quality or seriousness of my work.

I recognize the irony that in writing about my reluctance to engage with gender, I am doing exactly that. However, by reflecting on the reasons behind this reluctance, I hope to offer a small contribution to a broader conversation about gender, representation, and research in Professional Military Education. My hope is that these reflections may support or inspire further inquiry into these issues—particularly perspectives that remain underexplored in the current literature.

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³⁰ Pristed Nielsen, “Kvindelige Veteraner.” p. 89

³¹ Hart and Townsend, “Who believes gender research?”, p. 509; Skewes, “Feminist research in misogynistic times” p. 22

³² Key and Summer, “You research like a girl”

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