

PRACTICE-ORIENTED ARTICLE

# Juggling Risks: Towards a Safe and Inclusive Work Environment for Pregnant Soldiers in the Danish Army

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This article investigates the negative experience of pregnant soldiers. Drawing on seven interviews with female officers pregnant during their service in the Danish army, the article shows how, obliged to prioritise between the welfare of their unborn child and themselves on one hand and, on the other, the physically demanding performance of the military role model leading by example in the successful execution of their duties, these officers find it difficult reconciling the role of mother-to-be and the role of soldier. The pregnant body offers a challenge to the pregnant officer's performance as a disciplined and physically able soldier, it is argued; this, in turn, challenges the pregnant officer's social identity as soldier and leader. The article offers evidence that prevailing gender biases present difficulties for pregnant soldiers seeking to successfully navigate the demands of their work life. As leaders in the army seem to overlook these challenges, the two principal purposes of the article are as follows: First, to spell out the need to better support serving mothers-to-be through the enforcement of a pregnancy policy intended to secure a healthy work environment. Second, that if we are to secure equal opportunities for men and women in the armed forces, equity must be achieved through strategies of gender mainstreaming. However, a change in the work culture of the army is needed to make equity socially acceptable. These purposes will be supported by reference to the case study of pregnant soldiers.

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**Keywords:** Pregnancy; Female Soldiers; Gender Equality; Gender Bias; Work Environment; Leadership

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## Introduction

I do not want people to think that pregnant women in the military simply play the pregnancy card as an excuse to opt out. I guess I just wanted to prove that I still can perform my job despite the circumstances.

Through a variation of the idiomatic phrase "playing the woman card," which is typically used in the accusation that a woman is using her gender or sex to gain an advantage, a Danish lieutenant explained why she found it hard to opt out of physically demanding tasks as a pregnant platoon commander.<sup>1</sup> She wanted to show both her soldiers and her superiors that she was willing and able to perform physically strenuous tasks as an able-bodied soldier, embodying the role model of a soldier and leader routinely putting the task and the needs of the group over her own – even if this involved risks for her pregnant body and for her unborn child. Ultimately, she did not wish that her pregnancy, and thereby her sex itself, would be proven to be weaknesses; this might fuel arguments that women, being less able than men, had no place serving in the

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<sup>1</sup> All interviewees have been anonymised. Only the information required to put the examples and quotes into a meaningful context is used. The interviews that this article is based on have not been made available to secure anonymity of the subjects involved. Quotes from the interviews have been translated from Danish to English by the author.

military as soldiers. As a result, she got limited sleep on exercises, she carried heavy loads, she made a long strenuous march several months into her pregnancy, and she went on to the shooting range with her soldiers. All these examples can be identified as risky tasks for a pregnant worker according to the guidance for work during pregnancy and breastfeeding made by the Industry's Business Work Environment Committee (Industriens Branchearbejdsmiljøråd, 2016, pp. 4–5).

That said, neither the lieutenant herself nor her superior officer were always aware of these risk factors; none of them had investigated any such guidance. The Danish Armed Forces' Centre for the Work Environment (Forsvarets Center for Arbejdsmiljø) recommends the development of pregnancy policies to make clear potential considerations relating to pregnant employees in the given job functions (Appendix 1). I interviewed female army officers, pregnant during their service, from five out of a total of nine regiments in the Danish army; none of their regiments had done this. This is problematic; it is the employer's responsibility to make sure that work conditions are secure and healthy, as also stated in the Danish Working Environment Act (Arbejdsmiljøloven 2020, §15).

Expanding on seven interviews with female officers pregnant while working in the Danish army, this article provides an empirical foundation illuminating the ways in which military culture may lead pregnant soldiers to risk the health of their unborn children and themselves as they seek to reconcile the opposing requirements of the soldier and the mother-to-be. It will be argued that in a work environment where women experience bias due to the perceived limitations of their sex or gender, it becomes important to female officers to prove that not even pregnancy will make them less able soldiers than their male peers; further, this makes it of utmost importance that leaders in the army should take responsibility for their pregnant soldiers and make a detailed assessment of the tasks the pregnant soldier may and may not perform. Thus, the article argues that a clear pregnancy policy needs to be enforced by leaders at all levels within the military to secure a physically and mentally healthy work environment for pregnant soldiers.

The article also points out that this is only the first and most crucial step. It is also suggested that this issue is related to underlying discourses and practices within the military presupposing the abilities of the strong, able-bodied male soldier to be the norm and standard that female soldiers are expected to adhere to. Accordingly, the article argues that the case study of pregnant soldiers points to the existence of informal cultural codes sanctioning the assumption of the female body as subordinate to the male within the military. This must be dealt with on an organisational level to secure both formal and informal inclusion of female soldiers in a long-term perspective.

One may question how necessary it is to develop something as specific as a pregnancy policy considering how few soldiers become pregnant. But as the Danish Armed Forces wish to secure inclusion of female soldiers in a long-term perspective, it must address gender specific issues, such as pregnancy, affecting the female workforce.

Apart from my own thesis, published by the Royal Danish Military Academy in 2019 (Svop, 2019), no studies have been made of pregnant soldiers in Denmark. As it is indeed a very understudied subject around the world more broadly, with a single similar study in the shape of an American report (Steinberg et al., 1993) identifying discrimination during pregnancy to be a reason female officers of the late 20th century left the army, the empirical data provided in this article form a unique scientific contribution to military studies.

Below, I will first describe the social and cultural challenges, pointed to by other studies, that the Danish Armed Forces, among other Western armed forces, still face today in relation to gender equality, especially regarding the social construction of the able-bodied soldier. This will provide a context to the experiences of the female officers which will be the empirical basis of the article's analysis. I will then expand on the methods used in the study before turning to the analysis itself.

## **Gender Equality in the Danish Armed Forces Today**

As restrictions made to exclude women from military service have been removed over the years, women have gradually become more included in formal military service. Since 1992, women have been sanctioned to work in all job functions within the Danish Armed Forces. In practice, although the percentage of female soldiers is still quite low, it has been rising in recent years: from 5 percent in 2007 to 8.7 percent in 2021, and from 4.3 percent in 2007 to 10.3 percent in 2021 among officers in the Army specifically (Forsvarsministeriets Personalestyrelse, 2021a).

The principle of gender equality was introduced into the HR policy of the Armed Forces in 2003. Since then, the number of female recruits has grown from 2.6 percent in 2004 to 22.2 percent in 2020. This does not, however, match the percentage of women continuing on to a career within the military (Forsvarsministeriets Personalestyrelse, 2021b). Muhr and Søk-Andersen (2017, p. 374) point out that as long as men are framed as better suited to soldiery than women from the very beginning of their careers in the military on account

of their gendered bodies (something emphasised by the fact that military service is compulsory for men, while women can volunteer), social integration does not follow automatically from formal access. Informal cultural codes still stand in the way (Carreiras & Kümmel, 2008, p.161).

An interest in getting more women in the Danish Armed Forces can be traced back to Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security adopted by the United Nations Security Council in 2000. The resolution states, among other things, that women should have the same rights as men to contribute to working for peace and security, and that the meaningful inclusion of women in matters concerning peace and security increases the probability of achieving sustainable peace. Denmark was the first country to break the resolution down in a National Action Plan (NAP) in 2005; in 2020 it launched a fourth of these (Danish Ministry of Defence, 2020).

In 2011, the Danish Defence Ministry launched a diversity policy that identified the recruitment and retention of female soldiers, especially female officers, as an area of focus. The diversity policy is based on the understanding that a broader composition of employees provides a broader spectrum of competences which may improve the performance of the Danish Armed Forces; studies show a positive connection between diversity on the one hand and innovation, efficiency and problem-solving on the other (Forsvarsministeriet, 2011, pp. 3, 5). In recent years, the Danish Armed Forces have also launched campaigns aimed at attracting women. The fourth NAP argues that the aim is both a question of gender equality and a matter of simply recruiting and retaining enough potential and competent employees (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defence, & Ministry of Justice, 2020, p. 4).

This indicates that the diversity policy of the Danish Armed Forces has mostly been a strategy of what Egnell and Alam (2019, p. 13) term “gender balancing” – a means to attain gender equality in an organisation through increased recruitment and representation of women.

This approach is also evident from the NAP of 2014–2019 in which the focus is on “full and equal participation of women at all levels of conflict resolution, peacebuilding and reconstruction”; further, Denmark will “continue to work actively for the increase of the number of women in the armed forces” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defence, & Ministry of Justice, 2014, pp. 7, 30). However, a slight change of language can be observed in the NAP of 2020–2024. Whereas the NAP of 2014–2019 merely sets out the aim of securing protection and justice for foreign women in relation to sexual and gender-based violence in conflicts (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defence, & Ministry of Justice, 2014), the NAP of 2020–2024 adopts a “zero-tolerance policy in relation to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, both among our partners and within our own ranks” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defence, & Ministry of Justice, 2020, p. 10).

Instead of gender balancing, the zero-tolerance policy refers to a strategy of “gender mainstreaming”. The NAP (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defence, & Ministry of Justice, 2020, p. 13) as well as Egnell and Alam (2019, p. 13), define gender mainstreaming as the achievement of gender equality through an assessment of the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies and programmes in all areas and at all levels. Egnell and Alam argue that this may be a more effective and implementable approach to achieve organisational change than gender balancing.

Even though the NAP shows that gender mainstreaming has been a common strategy in foreign affairs, it has only recently become a strategy in relation to women in our own armed forces, and that only in relation to issues of sexual harassment.

The fact that sexual and reproductive rights as such are still only mentioned in relation to women in conflict zones in the NAP is probably because of the assumption, widely held in Denmark, that sexual and reproductive rights have long since been secured for Danish women. This is what Muhr describes as a “prevailing myth” of equality in the Danish self-understanding (2019, p. 33). As the sections below will show, however, the case of pregnant soldiers show that even though Danish soldiers do, indeed, have formal reproductive rights, informal norms still stand in the way of their full use. This shows that the Danish Armed Forces are not done with gender mainstreaming in relation to reproductive rights among “our own ranks” yet.

### **Living up to the Ideal of the Able-Bodied Soldier**

That female soldiers are still broadly perceived, in both Denmark and in other Western countries, to be less able than their male counterparts is evident from dominant debates both within academia, the public and the military itself, questioning whether women have bodies suited for soldiery in the first place (Carreiras & Kümmel, 2008; Cohn, 2000; Collins-Dogrul & Ulrich, 2018; Goldstein, 2018; Holyfield et al., 2019; Słok-Andersen, 2018, p. 64). This framing draws on a long historical tradition across many cultures that associates war and soldiers with the male body. Many studies show the association of constructions of the competent soldier and masculinity (see also Barrett, 2001; Knudsen & Teisen, 2018; Totland, 2009). Carreiras and Kümmel (2008), for example, show that governmental reports from several Western countries feature the target-

ing of women's bodies and reference putative physiological and psychological characteristics questioning the effectiveness of female soldiers – a lack of physical strength, menstruation, pregnancy, emotionality and an inability to perform under stress. The perception of the female body as less suited to soldiery is engrained in public discourse.

As pointed out by Knudsen and Teisen (2018, p. 50), it can be no surprise that the well-being of female soldiers must be affected by the dominance of these discourses. Their study, based on interviews with nine female veterans from the Danish army, also shows that to succeed socially and professionally as a soldier, one must be able to balance gender displays. Most of the time female soldiers experience the necessity of adjusting to the male majority – that of adopting masculine military behaviour by minimising their female-connoted characteristics and displaying physical strength to become part of the group (Knudsen & Teisen, 2018, p. 52–54).

According to the crip theory researcher McRuer (2006), the concept of able-bodiedness is built on the assumption that some bodies are privileged over others. Drawing on Foucault, McRuer (2006) argues that power works through the body. As such, what is normal, the able body, is dependent on the regulation and exclusion of the deviant, the disabled body, as it is the sanctioning of the abnormal that ensures the conformity of the normal. In this context, male bodies are privileged over female bodies as they are generally perceived to be more fit for soldiery, as Sløk-Andersen (2018, pp. 99–100) confirms. But, for McRuer (2006), there is nothing naturally given about what is and what is not an able body; this depends on the context. In the context of the military, both history and international variances in the criteria concerning population groups and physical demands designating who may become a soldier and who may not demonstrate that it is contingent and unsettled which bodies are considered able to become soldiers. In Denmark, for example, women could not become combat soldiers before 1988 (Muhr & Sløk-Andersen, 2017, p. 373). In many other countries, women are still excluded from combat roles today (Egnell & Alam, 2019, p. 7). Physical fitness standards tend to be just as contingent; these standards also vary in the armed forces, as a foundation for these standard, objective criteria tend to be lacking (Carreiras & Kümmel, 2008, p. 34).

Studies show that female soldiers and female leaders alike do not wish to get any special treatment of any kind. This is seen as a sign of weakness, designating them less able than their male peers (Carreiras & Kümmel, 2008, p. 162; Knudsen & Teisen, 2018, p. 55; Muhr, 2019, p. 45). Both Knudsen and Teisen's study of female soldiers in Denmark and Carreiras's study of female officers in Portugal and the Netherlands point to the issue being related to *tokenism*, a term coined by Kanter (1977). Tokenism occurs when individuals in a minority, such as women in the army, are perceived as representants of their category rather than as independent individuals. Women in the military thus suffers from what Goldstein calls "a tyranny of averages," since all female soldiers are judged from the fact that the average woman has less muscle strength and less endurance than the average man (see Carreiras & Kümmel, 2008, pp. 33–34). Their token status means that the minority is highly visible and is, to a large extent, constantly watched and judged. This puts a particular pressure on female officers' to perform, especially when they are expected to fail due to gender biases. To counter initial scepticism, female soldiers feel therefore forced to overcompensate, working harder to make sure they are among the best (Knudsen & Teisen, 2018, p. 58). The female soldiers in Knudsen and Teisen's (2018) study, however, explain that their male colleagues interpret any of their individual mistakes to embody how all females fail in the profession. This is also exemplified from the quote from the lieutenant in the introduction above. It is evident that the lieutenant is aware that her actions as a pregnant officer may affect how other pregnant women in the army will be perceived in the future – which is why she feels the performance pressure to show that she is willing to commit to the risky and physically demanding tasks of a soldier despite her pregnancy.

Carreiras's interviews with female officers exemplify the fact that even when a female officer is rewarded for doing a job well, her male colleagues joke that the reward is unfair, given only because she is a woman, and not because she performed well (Carreiras & Kümmel, 2008, p.168). Thus, formal rules and well-meaning special treatment can lose their intended inclusive effect, as they may give rise to negative perceptions of the female soldiers (Knudsen & Teisen, 2018, p. 55).

This is very problematic in terms of achieving true gender equality in the armed forces. Both men and women within the military are blind to the inherent inequality operating when women, as a minority and as newcomers, are expected to simply adjust to the established culture of masculinity and to live up to the ideal of the able-bodied soldier. This puts women in a disadvantaged position in terms of competing with their male peers as they must live up to even higher standards "to show their worth" and to prove gender biases wrong. The perception that equity is unfair, a perception shared by men and women alike, leads to the general confusion of "gender equality" and "equal treatment."

Focusing on the pregnant body makes it evident that it is problematic to always evaluate the female body on the same grounds as the male. While academic consensus concerning the precise division of sex and gender continues to be unsettled, certain aspects of female biology, as Ortner (1974) points out, have a documented, universal, cross-cultural effect on the division of labour between men and women: only women can give birth, menstruate, and breastfeed. As women need to spend more time on reproduction than men, they are commonly placed in a social role connected to the home, while men have more time to work outside it. That biology has real social consequences shows the importance of a gender mainstreaming approach to the achievement of gender equality in the military.

The case study will show how pregnant officers relate to their sex and gender and their identity as soldiers and mothers-to-be as they navigate a military culture dominated by masculine values.

## Method

The empirical foundation of this study is seven semi-structured interviews with female officers from five different regiments, both support and combat units, in the Danish army. These women had children within a period of five years while working in the military. The interviews were undertaken in August 2019 and each lasted about an hour. The interviewees were found through colleagues at the Royal Danish Army Academy as I was a cadet at the time of research.

As the epistemology of the study is phenomenologically grounded, the focus of the interviews was the female officers' subjective experiences as expressed orally. From a phenomenological perspective, I, as the interviewer, sought to explore how the sum of the officers' experiences constitute connections of meaning that, added together, create a social reality for officers becoming mothers in the army. As experience is led by expectations of what is normal, this affords insight into how the female officers make use of a repertoire of maxims, rules and regulations in order to figure out how to negotiate their lives as soldiers and mothers-to-be. Essential to the phenomenological point of view is that these norms and rules come to be in an interplay between the individual and the surroundings. Thus, the individual is both a part of creating the social structures that frame their actions and is influenced by social control and sanctions from the institutions they are a part of (Zahavi, 2013, pp. 83, 86). In this case the institutions are those of army, family and surrounding civilian society.

The fact that I am a female officer myself was useful as a common foundation for intersubjectivity in our mutual discourse. As argued by Marcus (1995, p. 126) a certain level of complicity is inevitable and necessary to cooperate with informants as it is the basis of trust. The danger of having too-similar roles and too much complicity between interviewer and interviewee is that the narratives of the interviewees are simply reproduced without any critical assessment. Therefore, I have also sought to use my position as a researcher to move in and out of insider and outsider perspectives in order to place myself in the position of a critical engaged researcher. As defined by Svendsen (2009, p. 37), a critical and engaged researcher seeks to create knowledge that addresses problems and creates reflective spaces of action for future practices while maintaining a fundamental solidarity towards the research area.

## *Can a Pregnant Woman be a Soldier?*

My analysis begins with the ways in which these pregnant soldiers related to the ideal of an able-bodied soldier.

Many of the interviewees had experienced a contradiction in working as an officer with a pregnant body. Describing being pregnant as a company commander for conscripts, one stated: "I was no longer a soldier. You can't be a soldier when you are pregnant." She explained that she thought it important for commanders at any level in the hierarchy to be able to perform the same physical tasks asked of their soldiers. But four months into pregnancy, she could no longer carry her equipment; at six months, she could not march the twenty to thirty kilometres with her soldiers. It affected her professional pride.

Contrary to the company commander, the lieutenant from the introduction, a platoon commander for conscripts while two to five months pregnant, still identified as a soldier while she was pregnant, for the most part. Initially, she wanted to act as a role model and be "100% in." She saw no reason why she should let herself be limited by the fact that she was pregnant as she still felt strong and able. When she was fourteen weeks into the pregnancy, however, she started to feel it limiting. On a long march she thought she could make it if she walked without her equipment but had to give up after a few kilometres and let the sergeants oversee the march instead. While she found that her colleagues were understanding, she still found it very frustrating not to be able to do her job herself. It also affected her professional pride and her identity as a soldier.

Another female officer, also a company commander at the time of her pregnancy, simply chose to leave her position for an office job. She explained that no one told her to leave; she did not want to work as a company commander if she could not be a physical role model. She explained that it is even more important for women than men to be in good physical shape to be recognised as a competent leader in the army:

As a woman, you must prove that you are always good enough, especially physically, that you can keep up with the boys. You are not measured on your intelligence, but on how many pull ups you can take or how fast you can run. So, I made a virtue out of that as a company commander. I had to be better than the conscripts. So, when I could not be that anymore, I felt I lost something. I could no longer sustain the same level of respect around me.

This quote supports a prevailing bias that has also been documented in interviews among male American officers. In this study it was found that female officers' leadership potential is often believed to be equivalent to their results in the military physical tests (Cohn, 2000, p. 133). This is an underlying sexist assumption linking gendered physical attributes with social and personal competences. This puts women at a disadvantage in how competent they are seen as officers, since an averagely fit woman will not be able to run as fast or to carry as much weight as the averagely fit man. Even less so when they are pregnant.

The above three examples make it evident that the collision of being pregnant as an officer and the professional identity of an able-bodied soldier is experienced as a crisis of identity. According to Jenkins (1997, pp. 53–56), people have both an internal and an external identity. The internal identity is the individual's self-definition – what one wishes to project in order to show who one is to oneself and to the surroundings. The above three examples show that according to the officers' self-definition they wish to project physical strength and stamina as expected by a competent soldier and a strong leader. The pregnant body is not consistent with this desired self-image, as a soldier's body should not be neither fat nor cosseted. Rather, the needs of the body should be put aside; it serves as a tool to get the task at hand done. When the pregnant body must suddenly be prioritised over work activities, an internal conflict in the pregnant officer's self-image is created.

Contrarily, the external identity is how the individual defines others. Social identity is the result of a dialectic process between the internal and external identity (Jenkins, 1997, pp. 53–56). This means that identity is always connected to group identity – itself based on how similar one is to people within the group and different to others outside the group. The pregnant body therefore distances the external identity, since the pregnant officer can no longer participate in collective physical practices on equal grounds with the other soldiers in the unit. Sharing these practices is, however, essential to the social identity of a soldier, as this serves to enforce group identity.

In this light, it is worth investigating those processes of inclusion and exclusion experienced by officers in relation to their pregnancy; social relations at work affect the mental work environment of female officers.

### ***Inclusion and Exclusion of Pregnant Soldiers***

When asked, all the interviewees experienced their state of pregnancy to have been socially accepted by their colleagues. In general, the seven interviewees did not think that they had been discriminated against in any way in relation to their pregnancy. They found that their colleagues had either reacted positively or neutrally to the fact that they were pregnant.

A couple of them reflected that their rank may have had influenced as no one would “dare” to offer negative remarks. As Jenkins (1997, p. 53) also acknowledges, power and authority are embedded in the social interactions through which the external identity come to be. Status may be a factor that make the officers' temporary pregnant bodies more socially acceptable, even though those bodies do not live up to the norm of the disciplined soldier's body.

The women who had colleagues who were themselves parents found them, especially, to be helpful and caring. Unsurprisingly, having colleagues with children diminished the distance between the internal and external identity in offering the possibility for the formation of group identity founded on parenthood rather than soldiery alone. In general, the women found that context played a role in decisions regarding the ableness of their bodies. Officers who had been pregnant while they had been in less physically strenuous job functions, while they worked among older professional soldiers, or while they had desk jobs, had felt much more at ease being pregnant as soldiers. They had not experienced the pregnancy as colliding with the military identity to the same extent as those officers working in more physically demanding job functions among younger soldiers.

In these types of units, there are also present, typically, overweight male soldiers. In this context, the pregnant body is more socially acceptable as military subject being one body among others that do not live up to the ideal of the able-bodied soldier.

One of the female officers who was in an office job during her pregnancy reflected that it would have been different if she had been in a job as physically demanding as that of the officers training conscripts: "I would not have felt that I would suffice. It shouldn't be me that they were waiting for, right? Then we are back to the fact that a woman must show her worth. That is something I'd care about." Again, it is evident that the stigmatisation of the female body as a less able military subject plays a part in the pregnant soldier's self-image.

The fact that none of the interviewees reported any explicit discrimination during their pregnancy, however, suggests that those expectations they believed they had to live up to may be internal, based on earlier experiences of sexism in their military careers. Even though colleagues may accept the pregnancy as a state of emergency in which the expectations of the female officer's performance change, the pregnant body still clashes with the female officer's identity as a competent officer.

One of the interviewees reflected that it would have been quite a different experience to be pregnant as a cadet, as all cadets have to live up to the same physical standards to pass the courses and exams. In this case, other cadets would find it unfair if different exceptions were made for those who were pregnant. Indeed, I observed this myself when I was a cadet; another cadet was pregnant, and several others expressed their belief that it was unfair that exceptions were made for her.

### ***Health Risks of Pregnant Soldiers***

The analysis above addresses the ways in which pregnancy affects the social identity of the female officer. What it lacks is a consideration of the ways in which the pregnant officer's work life, specifically, is affected by the physical health risks related to their work environment.

By and large, the interviewees had not investigated regulations relating to the avoidance of health risks for pregnant woman in the work environment to any great extent. The lieutenant from the introduction, for example, related that, about going swimming in a muddy lake during a company run:

I could not see why I should not dive in. But a sergeant who had worked with sanitation said: "Forget about it, don't do it." "Why not?" "Well, all the bacteria could potentially harm the child." I had not thought about that at all. So, then I thought, okay, then I will not do it.

The intranet of the Danish Armed Forces provides two different guides relating to pregnant women in the work environment. One is made by the Danish Work Environment Authority (Arbejdstilsynet, 2021) and one by the Industry's Business Work Environment Committee (Industriens Branchearbejdsmiljøråd, 2016). While neither is specific to the military profession, each provides general guidelines for pregnant workers. In the latter, it is stated that if there is any doubt, the pregnant person should be protected from any risky impacts. It is also stated that an important prerequisite for retaining pregnant workers is that a thorough assessment of the pregnant woman's work environment be made, plans of action are composed when risks have been identified, and there should be an ongoing dialogue between the pregnant worker and management about potential recourses to relief. This should be made in connection to the workplace risk assessment (Industriens Branchearbejdsmiljøråd, 2016, p. 4).

The Danish Armed Forces' Centre for the Work Environment has made a workplace risk assessment checklist (Appendix 1). It advises that all workplaces within the Danish Armed Forces employing women of child-bearing age should use the checklist as a basis for a pregnancy policy for the workplace in question. The idea is that a pregnancy policy will make it clear which potential considerations should be made.

As it turned out, none of the interviewees knew of any of these guides or had been presented with any checklist or explicit pregnancy policy. Most of them had not even thought to check if there were any guidelines for pregnant soldiers in the work environment, relying, rather, on the general advice that they had received from their midwives or doctors.

Only one of the interviewees stated that she had been seeking official guidance for operational pregnant soldiers. Specifically, she had been unsure whether there were any risks connected to the noise from shooting or the chemicals from gunpowder or smoke grenades. She had found no answers. It should be noted that the guides for pregnant women in the workplace available on the intranet do state that loud noise may harm the foetus (Industriens Branchearbejdsmiljøråd 2016, p. 5). From this it can be deduced that the noise from shooting poses a potential risk for pregnant women and should be avoided.

Two of the interviewees had been working as shooting range managers during their pregnancy, however. Neither had considered that doing so could potentially harm a foetus. In fact, one of them almost lost the child while she was busy acting as a shooting range manager:

I did not stop when I should have. I was standing at the shooting line all the time, while I had this four-month-old baby in my belly... and I did not sit down at all or take breaks. It was not very clever of me. That night, I passed out in the camp. They drove me to the hospital. I had a lot of Braxton Hicks. I was *so* scared that I would lose the child. And I was *so* scared that I would have to call home to my husband and say: "I'm sorry, inadvertently I was a soldier rather than being pregnant." I don't know if you recognise this, but when I am in the uniform, and I'm performing a task as an officer, I'm standing on the shooting line, I'm leading the battle, I have to have all the rifles under control, and I need to concentrate, it is not just fun and games... then I tend to neglect my own needs. After that incident, I had to be much more careful during my pregnancy in order to avoid Braxton Hicks.

Through physical training and physically challenging exercises, soldiers learn to put the demands of the body aside in order to carry out the mission at hand despite sleep deprivation, hunger, cold and physical exhaustion. The ability to delay gratification is a part of the soldier's professional identity, especially so for officers responsible for their subordinates under such circumstances. There is, then, a new skill to be learned by pregnant soldiers who must suddenly prioritise the needs of the body over the task at hand to protect the unborn child from harm. As the above quote demonstrates, this skill does not automatically arrive with becoming a mother-to-be.

As will be expanded on below, this serves, in sum, to signify three crucial points. First, pregnant soldiers need clearer and more prominent guidance and regulations to ensure that they are aware of, and will avoid, potential health risks related to the work as soldiers; second, the Danish Armed Forces need to develop a clear pregnancy policy for this purpose; and third, pregnant soldiers need more attention and support from their superiors in order to help them negotiate work and pregnancy in a sustainable way.

### ***Taking Responsibility***

According to the Danish Working Environment Act, it is the responsibility of the employer to ensure that work conditions are safe and healthy, that a workplace assessment is made, and that employees are aware of work-related risks and are educated in how to perform their job without danger (Arbejdsmiljøloven 2020, §15–§17a, §23). While it is also the responsibility of both superior and subordinate to contribute to the health and safety of work conditions within their given work area, the superior has the responsibility of supervision (Arbejdsmiljøloven 2020, §24, §26, §28).

The superior officers of the pregnant officers in this case study did not meet their responsibilities as set out by the Danish Working Environment Act. Most of them left it to the pregnant soldiers themselves to decide which precautions, if any, should be taken in relation to their pregnancy. One of the interviewees reflected that most commanders in the army, who are most often male, probably have little experience with pregnant employees, and assume that any pregnant soldier would know herself how best to handle the pregnancy. She also pointed out that she is, in fact, performing the role of superior in the workplace – which means that the primary responsibility belongs to her. According to the Danish Working Environment Act, however, primary responsibility always lies higher in the hierarchy. Nevertheless, it is important to note that officers are a resourceful personnel group; it may not be surprising that their superior officers delegate this responsibility and assume the officers are the best qualified to supervise themselves. One of the interviewees said that she was certain that her superior officer would have offered clearer guidance if she had been a pregnant contract soldier and not a pregnant officer. According to the law, this should not be the case.

It may be no surprise that the superior officer that took the most responsibility for the supervision of his pregnant officer's work conditions was both the commander of the lowest ranking, and the youngest officer, that I interviewed. At the beginning of her pregnancy, the company commander of the pregnant lieutenant in question often asked her to assess what she was able to participate in and what she was not. He soon realised that she had difficulties admitting to herself, as much as to her commander, which precautions should be taken. Later on in the pregnancy, he started giving her more clear guidelines:

I did not want my pregnancy to prevent me from doing my work. That was how I felt. The pregnancy should not stand in the way. So, I did quite a few things which I probably should not have. So, sometimes my company commander would come to me and say, as he did when I was five months into

my pregnancy: “On the next field exercise, you won’t carry your backpack.” “Okay, then I will not do that.” [Laughs] ... I think that it was difficult for me to admit that I could not do this or that. Then it was much easier if my company commander came and told me not to.

Evidently, it was a great relief to the lieutenant when her company commander took responsibility and told her not to participate in a physical activity, even when she already knew that it would be risky for her to participate in the activity in question due to her pregnancy. It gave her relief from the bad conscience she otherwise felt from not living up to the ideal of the able-bodied soldier who should always put the task first.

What the above shows is the complex relationship between social gender and biological sex. In the military, it is a commonly held that effectiveness should always come first, and if the female gender were to stand in the way of military effectiveness in any way, it only serves to prove that women do not belong in the military (see also Egnell & Alam, 2019, p. 6–7; Carreiras & Kümmel, 2008, p. 31; Maninger in Carreiras & Kümmel, 2008, pp. 9–27). It thus becomes important to female soldiers to prove that their biology does not compromise military efficiency. Socially, female officers do not wish to lose face by being limited by their biology. The fact that pregnancy imposes physical limits to an officer’s performance has concrete social consequences affecting how pregnant officers navigate their work life. Ultimately, they must choose to either put the health of themselves and their child at risk or to distance themselves from the social identity as soldiers.

But there is a solution. A healthier work environment can be secured for pregnant soldiers through the employer’s taking responsibility; doing this requires the employer becoming informed of the work-related risk factors associated with pregnancy and that they should make an individual assessment of the pregnant soldier in question as recommended by the Centre for the Work Environment. The pregnant soldier in question should be aware of the workplace risks related to her pregnancy, and a plan should be developed, in collaboration with the pregnant employee, related to the ways in which risky activities might be avoided in a sustainable way. As a couple of my interviewees expressed, the wish to avoid burdening their colleagues with a bigger workload is a significant reason for their reluctance to opt out of potentially harmful tasks. A sustainable plan for the distribution of work during pregnancy and maternity leave<sup>2</sup> is therefore of utmost importance if a healthy work environment is to be secured, as is the openly-discussed possibility of placing the pregnant soldier in position where she is less exposed to risk.

In fact, the Centre for the Work Environment recommends that in conducting risk assessments, a place of work should make divisions between the categories “Here pregnant woman cannot work,” “Here pregnant women can work with restrictions” and “Here women can work without risk” (Industriens Branchearbejdsmiljøråd, 2016, p. 7–8). If the organisation took the responsibility, and these assessments were made, established, and enforced through an explicit pregnancy policy within all the workplaces in the military, this would relieve pregnant soldiers from a great deal of stress. Concrete external guidelines would relieve the individual from the absurd choice of either acting as a mother who takes care of her unborn child and acting as an officer who always puts the task first, no the matter the cost.

The challenge of this approach is, as mentioned earlier, is that “special treatment” of women may lead to negative perceptions of female soldiers through them being labelled as less effective soldiers, even when such special treatment is formal and well-meaning such as a pregnancy policy. On the other hand, a potentially harmful pressure to perform caused by such perceptions has simply necessitated the issue be dealt with on the organisational level. Taking responsibility as an organisation, then, does not only entail the enforcement of pregnancy policy itself; leaders within the military must also challenge such perceptions. Military leaders must legitimise the idea that social equity is in fact required for pregnant soldiers performing physical and strenuous work, and that they should be Performing their work under appropriate expectations until they go on parental leave. That said, this should be a part of a much broader communication strategy within the military’s diversity policy addressing broader issues of the informal exclusion of female soldiers. A pregnancy policy is a beginning; it should not stand alone.

## Conclusion

This article has shown that balancing the identities and bodies of a mother-to-be and a soldier is experienced by pregnant officers as difficult to reconcile. Practice shows that leaders in the army tend to leave it to the pregnant soldier herself to assess which tasks she can and cannot participate in during her pregnancy.

<sup>2</sup> Maternity leave substitutes in soldier positions do not exist at the present. Instead, practice tends to be that the person on maternal leave is moved to a less demanding position and/or the tasks of the former position distributed among colleagues.

This presents pregnant soldiers the absurdity of having to choose between getting the job done and avoiding risks to the health of themselves and their unborn child. This choice becomes difficult in a work culture in which female soldiers are accustomed both to battle sexist stigmas and to prioritising the demands of the job over those of the needs of the body. Often, they do not even know which tasks may put the unborn child at risk.

Through an approach of gender mainstreaming, the immediate solution is simple, and the means of achieving it even ready to hand: to make workplace risk assessments, as recommended by the Danish Armed Forces' Centre for the Work Environment, and to implement and enforce workplace-specific pregnancy policies. In the army, these could be made by the work environment representative at the regiment level. It would also be the responsibility of the work environment representative to inform both superiors and the HR department in the regiment in question about the assessment and how to make use of it. A pregnancy policy will provide clear rules and guidelines for superiors and pregnant employees on the appropriate precautions to take.

The issue of dealing with the informal inclusion of female soldiers, having bodies broadly perceived to be less fit for soldiery than their male peers, is a much more daunting task. It cannot be denied that pregnant bodies are, in fact, less operationally effective in military terms as the military subject must, in essence, be both willing and able to put his or her life at risk to protect others. It is not surprising, then, that officers in combat roles should not experience it to be possible that they could be both soldiers and pregnant. There is a widely-held assumption that their bodies should not be put at risk but should, rather, be protected.

Nevertheless, both practice and research have shown that women have succeeded as efficient and competent soldiers. Women will continue to serve, and the issue of informal inclusion is not merely one of strategic diversity policy but a matter of changing discourses and norms within the ranks, from bottom to top. Leaders in the military have the opportunity to make it an acceptable norm that there will be times in a soldier's life where they are a soldier first, and times where they must first be (say) a parent – and to place them in positions where this is possible. Military leaders at all levels play a key role in dealing with the tokenism and sexist stigma that female soldiers are facing. This may be essential for the military's ability to retain soldiers in a long-term perspective.

This case study opens new research questions that remain unanswered. How does rank affect the ways in which pregnancy is experienced as a female soldier? How are pregnant soldiers viewed by their colleagues? How does motherhood affect the retention of female soldiers? In relation to balancing a career as a soldier and a parent, which issues are gender-specific and which issues are not? Finally, assuming the recommendations here are followed, it should be investigated at some point whether the work conditions of pregnant soldiers have improved, and how.

The final questions remain unresolved for now – but together make evident the need for continuing research.

## Additional File

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Supplement File.** Appendix 1. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.102.s1>

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## Competing Interests

The author hopes to become an expectant officer herself during her military career in the Danish army. The author has no other competing interests.

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