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Toward gender and LGBT equality in the Serbian armed forces



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SYNOPSIS

This article focuses on gender equality in the Serbian Armed Forces (SAF), discussing both gender equality and sexual orientation equality (LGBT equality). Based on the examination of researches and other data, this article concludes that despite the positive shifts granting women the right to military education and professional military service, women continue to be a minority in the SAF. The article further concludes that while there is no official discriminatory policy as regards the admission of members of the LGBT population to the armed forces in Serbia, the few researches into this issue have revealed deeply ingrained views according to which the presence of homosexuals in the armed forces compromises cohesion and leads to unit conflict and division. Finally, the article concludes that a social context ruled by stereotypes and negative attitudes is not conducive to creating conditions for equal opportunity for all, regardless of sex, sexual orientation or gender identity, and that it will take a time before complete equality and diversity are attained in the SAF.

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Introduction

The cornerstone of a democratic society is the right to equality of all of its members, one of the more important aspects of equality being gender equality. At the specialized Inter-Parliamentary Union Conference organized in 1997 it was concluded that gender equality in “modern democratic societies, is nothing less than a new social contract in which men and women work in equality and complementarity, enriching each other mutually from their differences... What is basically at stake is democracy itself” (*Specialized Inter-Parliamentary Conference, 1997*). Although the term gender equality denotes equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for women and men, and girls and boys, in practice it typically refers to women’s equality. This inevitably begs the question: why does ‘gender’ sometimes seem limited to ‘women’s issues’? The answer to this question stems from the position of women in society and the attitudes toward them. *Bern and Bern (1970)* observed that traditionally it was expected of all women to aspire to the same goals of getting married and having children and pursue traditional careers such as secretaries, nurses, or teachers. Even today many cultures, modern ones included, are dominated by patriarchy which represents a social system in

which the bulk of power, prestige and other socially important resources are allotted to men, enabling male rule and domination over women (*Spasic et al., 2015*). Male domination is conspicuous in the sphere of political decision-making, international relations and the security sector, particularly in the armed forces which are perceived as a male-dominated organization, with hegemonic masculine culture.

However, in recent years numerous organizations (UN, NATO, EU, OSCE, etc.) have stated in their official documents that inclusion of women in all the spheres of society is an essential prerequisite for attaining peace and economic and social development. This was ratified by the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (*Fourth World Conference on Women Beijing Declaration, 1995*) and *UNSC Resolution 1325 (2000)*, which emphasizes that women and men are both essential to promoting sustainable peace and stresses the necessity to involve women in conflict prevention, peace building, post-conflict reconstruction as well as to increase women’s participation in politics and security institutions. Acknowledgment of the role of gender in attaining peace and stability has resulted in some states incorporating recruitment of women to the armed forces as a strategy in National Action Plans (NAPs) for the implementation of Resolution 1325.

Integration of women in the armed forces has become important for other reasons as well, above all equality, respect for human rights and elimination of discrimination. In developed countries diversity is becoming a democratic imperative in that the professional army reflects the makeup of the entire population, women constituting up to 50% of the population in almost all countries. On the other hand, owing to organizational and technological developments (computers, digitalization, etc.) as well as changes in the forms of warfare (cyber warfare, drone warfare, etc.) physical strength is no longer the only requirement for work in the armed forces and, in addition, an increasing number of positions that are not gender-specific are being created in the armed forces. Moreover, numerous surveys have confirmed that the presence of women improves the effectiveness of armed forces, especially in the field of peacekeeping missions and in terms of civil-military cooperation. There is increasing evidence that non-combat missions are best served by a better gender mix, particularly in terms of interaction with local communities (Groothedde, 2013; UN DPKO/DFS, 2010; United Nations General Assembly, 2005).

Although the gender equality issue focuses mostly on gender and equal opportunities for men and women, some authors believe that discussion of gender equality should also take into consideration sexual rights, since Runeborg (2008: 5) notes that “gender and sexuality are both social constructs, that both are about values and meanings and concerned with norms that permit and constrain certain forms of social and sexual expression. That ultimately both are about power and politics”. Research conducted by The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies states that the position of the LGBT population in the armed forces goes beyond the human rights issue. According to this research, it must be understood that “diversity is critically important for defense organizations to survive and thrive in the twenty-first century security environment” (Polchar, Sweijs, Marten, & Galdiga, 2014:11). In order to respond more efficiently to new threats and accomplish set missions, the armed forces must expand their military skill sets. Therefore, it is vital that defense organizations recruit skilled personnel on talent rather than gender, sexual orientation or gender identity. We must bear in mind that gender equality is not solely a ‘women’s’ issue and that it refers to equal rights and opportunities for women and men and, as we argue, equality for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) population. Gender equality means equal acceptance in the community, equal working conditions, accomplishment at work and in other spheres of life, and equal opportunity for promotion, regardless of sex, gender identity or sexual orientation.

In this paper we will examine the current status of women’s and LGBT equality in the Serbian Armed Forces. The aim is to describe the status of women and LGBT population and analyze the issues concerned with their participation and integration in the SAF as well as the context in which efforts are being made to implement equality, that is, the prevailing attitudes toward gender and LGBT equality in the SAF. This paper draws upon literature reviews, including a diverse range of previous research and surveys conducted by the MoD Institute for Strategic Studies, UNDP and non-governmental organizations which provide information about the achievement of gender equality in the SAF as well as the prevailing stereotypes in this organization, and are augmented by research data from a survey with Serbian military cadets. The opinion poll of Military

Academy cadets is, to the author’s knowledge, the first public survey to sound out attitudes toward the LGBT population in the military. Existing research on gender equality in the SAF is thus supplemented with an analysis of equality from the standpoint of not only gender but sexuality as well, making this paper a contribution to the existing body of research on gender equality in the SAF.

Serbian context: gender equality & stereotypes

The issue of gender equality, particularly that of more women serving in the armed forces, has become a topical one in the Republic of Serbia in recent years as well. Being a post-conflict country in transition, the Republic of Serbia has made a commitment, as part of its reform processes and efforts toward integration into the EU, to adopt democratic values and standards (the Copenhagen criteria), one of them being elimination of discrimination and integration of the gender perspective at all levels. Gender equality is guaranteed by the Serbian Constitution, laws and strategic documents, and Serbia is a signatory to a number of international conventions and documents that guarantee equality of men and women (Biserko, 2012). In order to enhance the position of women in the security sector, the Republic of Serbia adopted a National Action Plan for the implementation of UNSC Resolution 1325 in 2010, which specified the measures aimed at introducing the gender perspective into the security sector. At the same time Serbia is a signatory of documents forbidding sexual and gender discrimination.¹

The fact is, however, that Serbia is adopting modern laws and strategies much faster than it is able to change the day-to-day life of women and reduce discrimination (Petrušić, 2015) and the real rights and position of women in Serbia are, therefore, often described as being merely “trimmings of democracy” (EurActiv, 2012). Research on gender equality in the Serbian Armed Forces have shown that women are a minority in this organization and that the predominant belief is that a woman cannot be as good at performing military duties as a man (Bjeloš, Odanović, & Gajić, 2012). Gender roles and the division of duties into ‘male-only’ and ‘female-only’ are present in the armed forces, so that women are predominantly employed in the so-called other services which include civilians in military service, medical staff, administrative staff, military police, full-time or part-time reservists, etc. In other words, according to the study *Gender and Security Sector Reform in Serbia*, “since the end of World War II, women’s access to civilian jobs in the security sector has never been challenged, in contrast to their access to operational posts in traditional security institutions” (Stojanović & Quesada, 2010:16). There are 4.93% of women in the SAF, with only 1.05% of them in command structures (Balon, 2014:13). In addition to being a minority in the armed forces, women are also stereotyped as physically inferior to men and incapable of performing military duties as well as men. A glaring example of this is a statement of the renowned Serbian military analyst, Miroslav Lazanski. When asked about the ‘expansion’ of women in the Serbian Armed Forces in a newspaper interview, Lazanski said: “Recently I had an opportunity to watch a female professional soldier guard an ammunition depot. The ‘poor thing’ weighed less than 50 kilos. Buried under a helmet and with a huge rifle hoisted up on her shoulder, thin, skinny, out in the rain, I was

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