

Officers' reasons for resignation

Introduction

In the light of the low share of woman employees within the Swedish Armed Forces¹, together with the governmental demand for expanding this low share, it is growing more important to try to map out the contributory factors to the existence of so few woman officers within the Armed Forces. One frequently presented factor is that woman officers would to a higher degree than men resign from their work within the Armed Forces. A statistic analysis of the HQ's staff register on resignations, spanning from 1 January, 1995 to 1 January, 2001, shows, however, that the number of woman officers' resignations does not exceed that of male officers. Forty woman officers resigned in this period of time (leaves of absence not included). Out of a total population of 360 woman officers, this makes 12.5 %. In the corresponding ranks within the same period of time, 2,178 male officers resigned. Out of a population of 14,166, this equals 15 % (the basic data drawn from the Armed Forces HQ in 1999). In spite of that, it is important to try to throw light upon factors that influence woman officers' decision to resign from their work within the Armed Forces for the purpose of taking measures to increase the possibilities of keeping the few woman officers still serving within the Armed Forces today.

The HQ Staff planning, Development, assigned the National Defence College, Dept. of Leadership, to perform a study for the purpose of throwing light upon factors that may have had an impact on woman officers' decision to leave the Armed Forces.

On the basis of interviews with resigned woman and male officers (representing all the defence services) a questionnaire has been drawn up and been distributed to 80 officers.

Two things are important to keep in mind, and they are closely related to each other. First, Sweden still holds on to the conscripts system, forcing every young man to fulfil national service². The second thing important to keep in mind while discussing a Swedish case like this is the fact that being an officer in Sweden has historically been a lifetime job.

Method

Participants, sampling and the matching process

Throughout the period of time over which the study extended, 1 January, 1995 – 1 January, 1999, a total of 40 woman officers have resigned. A matched group of male officers (40) (in terms of defence service, unit affiliation and rank) constituted the male survey group. The economic and time frames³ given, the decision was taken that the main part of the investigation would build on a questionnaire study. Based on the fact that it was the first time that early resignations were studied from a gender point of view, it was decided that the questionnaire should be built on the basis of interviews with early-resigned officers.

¹ Women have since 1980 been allowed to serve in the Armed Forces, and there are since 1989 no restrictions what so ever regarding where they might serve. Today the officer's corps comprises two (2) percent women.

² One problem is of course, due to the downsizing we are all experiencing, that only one third of the yearly cohort of young men, approximately 17 000 men, actually fulfil their national service.

³ Since the earlier employed officers were spread all over the country, there would be too extensive travelling, which would in turn have cost a lot of money and been time-consuming, if the investigation would have been carried out by means of interviews.

A majority of factors governed how the introductory interviews were to be constructed. Since the purpose of the study was to identify unique resignation factors among woman officers, it was important to compare woman and male officers' reasons for resignation. Furthermore, it was important to attempt to identify variables, regarded to have had the potential of influencing the decision to leave one's position as a regular officer. Feasible variables that might have an impact on the decision to leave were age, family affairs, rank and unit opportunity, etc. As different ranks firstly include opportunities of differences in actual work content, and secondly encompass a variety of prospects of promotion in terms of access to certain positions and further training, etc., rank was selected as one of the variables to be kept constant when setting up the control group. As family affairs and age may be considered to be interconnected, and age to a great extent correlating with rank, family affairs and age were dropped. It was also regarded important to keep constant the defence service affiliation of the control group members, as different units, at different points of time, have been exposed to either real threats of closure or rumours.

The 40 woman officers, who formally resigned in the period 1 January, 1995 – 1 January, 1999, were at the time of their resignation holding the ranks of Second Lieutenant, Lieutenant and Captain. Since the activities of the different defence services differ quite markedly from one another, and they had also at the time more or less extensively been influenced of closedown, etc., it was decided that all the defence services would be represented in the introductory interview study. The actual distribution of early-resigned woman officers all over the ranks together with the above reasoning on differences between defence services, resulted in all the conceivable combinations of defence services, ranks and gender being preferably taken into consideration in the introductory interviews. Given practical circumstances, interviews were carried out with prematurely resigned woman and male Air Force officers, holding the ranks of Second Lieutenant and Lieutenant, whereas in the Army and in the Navy interviews took place with prematurely resigned woman and male officers, holding the ranks of Captain and Second Lieutenant. A total of 12 interviews were carried out.

When drawing up the interview questions, we used an imaginary, governing time axis, whose starting point indicated where the individual for the first time got into contact with the Armed Forces (contact in its broadest sense). Along this time axis, there were certain stages in the respondent's life that might have had an impact on the decision per se to resign as an officer. The following stages were identified as crucial: grounds for her/his professional choice of being an officer, military career, military experiences, the decision procedure per se and a description of the working life, following her/his officer career. Below (fig. 1) it is accounted for more in detail, how direct questions desirable to be highlighted during the interviews were identified on the basis of the different stages of life. In addition to this, there were questions of a background nature in the form of e.g. marital status, children if any, age, residential place, housing conditions and professional training, the officer's training excluded.

Grounds for choice of occupation	Military career	Military experiences	The "crisis"	After resignation
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Figure 1. The connection between the respondent's different stages of life and the growth of the interview guide.

The results from the interviews were processed in the spring of 1999 by two researchers of the Department of Leadership (LI), a psychologist from the Swedish National Service

Administration and a Recruitment Centre officer. The product was a questionnaire that was distributed in the spring of 1999 (to the woman officers) and in the autumn of 1999 (to the male officers). On the basis of the obtained answers, the inquiry questions and the answer alternatives were generated.

Instruments and procedure

Initially, a questionnaire with an accompanying covering letter was sent out. Fourteen days after the requested closing date for answers, reminders were sent to those who had not yet responded. After further fourteen days, following the requested closing date for responses to this reminder, a second reminder was sent out together with a new questionnaire, addressed to those who had not yet responded on that occasion.

The addressees of the questionnaires were, as mentioned above, all the woman officers who had, according to the HQ's staff register, left their position in the period spanning from 1 January, 1995 to 1 January, 1999. Furthermore, the questionnaire was distributed to a control group (N = 40) of male officers, who had left in the equivalent period of time. This group of men were randomly sampled from the HQ mailing lists⁴, giving consideration to the previously mentioned variables being kept constant. The responding frequency of the woman officers was 92.5 %, and that of the male officers 57.5 %.

The members of the survey group had taken a stand on 25 questions concerning, among other things, individual-related factors (age, period of employment, marital status), the characteristics of the task (unit, defence service affiliation), job satisfaction (e.g. pay, window of opportunity as to promotion and development potentialities, social intercourse with co-workers), factors related to the labour market (access to optional employments) and reasons for resignation (the pay range, closedown of a unit, conflict with the commander, etc.)

Results

Background data

An analysis (χ^2 – test) with respect to the number of children, rank, defence service affiliation and branch of service (i.e. combat, support, maintenance activities) showed no significant differences between the woman and male officers, who had responded to the questionnaire. The analysis of the background data for the branch of defence service that the woman officers belonged to, showed the following percentages: the Army 41 %, the Navy 24 % and the Air Force 35 %. The equivalent figures for the male officers were 30 % for the Army, 17 % for the Navy and 52 % for the Air Force.

The analysis of the main services share evidenced the following percentages for the woman officers: combat arm units 35 %, supporting units 38 %, maintenance activities 16 % and other activities 11 %. The equivalent figures for the male officers were: combat arm units 35 %, supporting units 35 %, maintenance activities 22 % and other activities 4 %.

The woman officers held the following ranks when leaving the Armed Forces: Second Lieutenant 41 %, Lieutenant 43 % and Captain 16 %. The male officers held the following

⁴ The names appeared in alphabetical order, and the Nth was drawn. N was calculated by putting the size of the group of women in the different groups, i.e. unit and rank, in relation to how big the group of men was within the same strata.

ranks when leaving the Armed Forces: Second Lieutenant 49 %, Lieutenant 35 % and Captain 17 %.

Seventy percent of the women took the decision to enter the officer training prior to the enrolment, as compared with solely 13 % of the men. The men decided in the main to enter the officer's profession during their national service training (48 %).

Both woman (62 %) and male (61 %) officers agreed to the statement that trying the officer's profession seemed to be attractive, but time would show for how long. However, a number of woman officers (32 %) held the opinion that the officer's profession was a lifetime profession before entering it, compared to what the men (17 %) did.

The average age of all respondents was 29 year.

Reasons for resignation

All in all, the results evidenced few differences between the woman and male officers, in terms of background variables and reasons for resignation as well. However, a few interesting discrepancies did come out. Female officers pinpointed the poor staff policy as the predominant and contributory factor generating the thought of leaving (24 %). Male officers, on the other hand, mentioned the conflict between their need of spending more time with their family and lengthy military exercises as factor number one, among others, that caused them to think of leaving (26 %).

Interestingly, women (5 %), to a significantly greater extent than men (0 %), singled out a conflict with co-workers at their place of work and conflicting opinions of careers between them and their partner (women: 5 %; men: 0 %) as reasons for resignation. As such reasons, the men instead pinpointed, to a higher degree than the women did, the unsatisfactory pay range (men: 9 %; women: 3 %) and poor prospects of making a career (men: 9 %; women: 3 %).

As for the triggering reasons for actually resigning, the woman officers stated as their principal ones that they had the prospect of civil training (27 %), their unit had been relocated / closed down (19 %), that they had been offered new, more attractive and better-paid jobs (19 %). In addition to this, 16 % indicated the Armed Forces poor staff policy as the predominant reason for their resignation. Thirty-three per cent of the woman officers furthermore advanced that their negative experiences of being a woman within the Armed Forces had influenced their decision to resign. The contents of their negative experiences were described in the open-ended questions as: a lack of woman role models, dominating men, gender harassment, ignorance of gender harassment and the absence of moral courage together with the undermining of woman officers' authority (e.g. by means of contrary orders from commanders holding higher ranks). Forty-nine per cent stated that they had been exposed to sexual harassment (Sexual harassment is in a Swedish law, governing equality between men and women and passed in 1998, defined as "such an undesired behaviour of sexual nature or any other undesired, gender-based behaviour that violates the employee's integrity at his/her work." The implication of this wide definition is e.g. that direct innuendos as well as being promotionally passed over, are contained in this definition.

The men gave as the most substantial reason for their resignation that they had the prospects of civil training (17 %), that they had been offered new, more attractive and better-paid jobs

(13 %), that the Armed Forces were no more credible as armed forces (13 %) and their intolerable family affairs (13 %).

In response to the question whether the Armed Forces and/or the respective unit could have done anything that would have made the officer stay, the majority of the women and men answered NO (replied in the negative). The woman officers answered, however, that the Armed Forces and/or their unit could have shown a more favourable attitude towards differences, and that the commanders could have actively tried to settle conflicts and to counteract tendencies of cold-shouldering. The woman officers, as well as the male officers, also answered that the Armed Forces and/or their unit could have offered the person concerned some other position. A majority of the woman officers (62 %) and the male officers (69 %) additionally stated that they did not repent their decision to leave the Armed Forces. An analysis of the open-ended questions evidenced that leadership and training experiences were, in the woman and male officers' opinion, the most useful military skills in their civil work.

As to the rest, it may be worth paying attention to that the woman officers mainly discussed their thoughts of resigning with their partner (78 %), whereas the male officers principally broached this subject with military colleagues (74 %).

Summary and comments

The overall picture of this investigation suggests that the answers to the inquiry questions given by the woman and male officers are much of a similar kind. However, it seems that it is above all the poor Armed Forces staff policy that makes the woman officers think of resigning. Related to the fact that the women did not talk with their military colleagues about their thoughts of resigning to the same extent that their male colleagues did, consideration may be given to the current extent of participation that the woman officers perceive at their places of work. The analysis of the answers to the open-ended questions furthermore shows that a large number of the woman officers had gathered fairly negative experiences of being a woman within the Armed Forces, firstly in terms of sexual harassment, secondly in terms of sexism, i.e. work-related information being withheld from her, and her career opportunities in some cases being intentionally foiled, or her being promotionally passed over at a certain appointment, all due to gender. As seen from the analysis of background data, the majority of the woman officers leaving the Armed Forces proved to belong to the Army (41 %). The Army is the defence service with the smallest share of woman officers (1.3 %). This may be interpreted as the Army being the defence service that has the most serious difficulties in attracting and keeping woman officers.

Worth noting is furthermore that one third of the cohort of woman officers would like to see more energy on the part of commanders as to committing themselves to settling conflicts and counteracting tendencies of cold-shouldering at their place of work, and they would also welcome that the Armed Forces preferably show a more favourable attitude towards differences all along the line.

As for the men, the conflict between their need of spending more time with their family and lengthy military exercises was the predominant factor, among others, that caused them to think of leaving. This may seem astonishing, as this factor is generally connected to women's confined opportunities to invest in their careers. The result may, however, be understood as an

indication of changing gender role traditions, within the framework of which men are coming close to women's commitments within the family sphere. This is also in line with recent studies that manifest tendencies of men's expanding preference for their families (Ivarsson, 2000). A similar tendency is also to be found in Johansson's (1999) referral to the HQ as regards proposals for measures to be taken with the purpose of decreasing the number of resignations from the Advanced Command Course⁵ of the Swedish National Defence College. In this context it came to hand that the family problems, e.g. will/ability to relocate, were held to be one of the weightiest reasons for the increasing number of resignations from the Advanced Command Course.

It should, however, be pointed out that the women's answer that the poor staff policy had generated their thought of leaving the Armed Forces, is a rather broad issue that additionally may encompass experiences of conflicts together with the combination of working and family conditions.

Another relevant, interesting aspect is that the men's reasons for resignation are career-oriented, whereas those of the women constitute conflicts between one's own career and that of one's partner (a reason presented by no men). One explication of this could be that the women give up military career opportunities, because they cannot accordingly offer their family household chores due to the demands of the officer's profession.

Both the woman and male officers seemed satisfied with their decision to leave the Armed Forces. Many of them stated, however, that if the Armed Forces would have offered them some other position, they might have reconsidered to stay. This may be understood as if there is an inherent rigidity in the system, which results in individuals, who are not satisfied with their current tasks, being unable to have other, more adequate ones. That implies confined career/development prospects within the Armed Forces.

Seventy per cent of the women, compared to 13 % of the men, had decided to be an officer already before their enrolment. More woman officers than male officers also indicated that they saw the officer's profession as a lifetime profession when entering it. This suggests that the group of woman officers are more dedicated to the profession. At the same time, the woman officers give a rather negative picture of their experiences of being a woman within the Armed Forces. The holistic perspective is that the Armed Forces have not successfully managed to draw on the commitment that these women are inspired by and with which they enrich the profession.

In sum, the picture given by the investigation can be expressed by the following requirements:

- Enhanced acceptance of women as officers
- An improved integration of woman officers
- A broader knowledge base and more efficient measures to be taken within the Armed Forces against sexual harassment.
- A wider window of opportunity to combine commitments to employer and family

Finally, we suggest the creation of a system for progressively monitoring woman officers' resignations for the purpose of gaining an insight into the prospective consequences of performed interventions.

⁵ A course for Majors that has been selected to get additional training in order to eventually be promoted to Lieutenant Colonels and further on, earlier known as the General Staff.