The challenges of integrating culture and gender perspectives in professional military education when everyone is for it.

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The integration of gender and culture in officer training is a serious topic, and I feel very humble addressing you all under this heading today. Most of us live very protected lives, and it is sometimes difficult grasp the gravity of the task that some of the cadets we teach day-to-day may one day face. It is only 36 years ago that Europe saw the Srebrenica massacre, where Serb soldiers separated men and women into different groups, executed the men and boys, and raped and abused the women and girls. The Dutch battalion, which was under UN mandate to protect civilians in Srebrenica, was, according to the subsequent official Dutch report, ill-prepared, under-equipped and woefully outnumbered. Atrocities like the one in Srebrenica in 1995 still happen all too often. There is perhaps no starker illustration of the importance of what the UNSCR 1325 and subsequent related resolutions have lent universal recognition, namely that war and conflict affect men and women differently, and that a gender perspective must be included in all planning, conflict prevention and resolution, and in post-conflict reconstruction.

Now, I say that the UNSC resolutions have lent universal recognition to the importance of gender mainstreaming efforts, and the title of my talk may seem to imply that all work has been done now that everyone is for it. True, progress has been made, but a lot of work remains, as the recently published report from Save the Children International states:

> 2020 was supposed to be a once-in-a-generation opportunity for women and girls. The year when governments, businesses, organisations and individuals who believe in equal treatment for all people were going to develop a five-year plan for how to work together to accelerate progress for gender equality, in celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Then COVID-19 struck. Now, 2020 risks being a year of irreversible setbacks and lost progress for girls. Unless the world acts fast and decisively, the impact on girls' futures – and on all our futures – will be devastating. (Szabo & Edwards, 2020, p. ii)

I will not be talking about the grim realities around the world, but it is necessary, always, to keep the solemn nature of the very real problems of the world in mind, because at some point in their careers our soon-to-be officers may find themselves in situations not unlike the one Dutchbat was in in Srebrenica. Our efforts to integrate culture and gender perspectives in officer training should help them even in such situations.

What I *will* be talking about are some of the inevitable and unintended consequences of making gender and culture a topic for integration in military organizations and officer training programmes. I will argue that the things we do to address gender and culture are simultaneously necessary and adverse, and that successful integration of gender and culture topics in officer training relies in part on understanding these mechanisms.

In her landmark study *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir stated that the "subject [of women] is irritating, especially for women; and it is not new" (Beauvoir, 2011). And let us be honest: the topic of gender in a military context is about women, and to a lot of people, both men and women, it is irritating. Culture, a less politicized and contentious term, is often in the context of operations framed as things pertaining to civilian matters, perhaps primarily how not to offend the local population in a low-intensity conflict, for instance by upsetting religious sensibilities or tarnishing someone's honor by intervening in a wife beating. In a national setting, at least a Norwegian setting, culture concerns military customs and attire, commemorations, and art and music. It is often difficult to think, viz. to shape the thought, in a military setting that gender concerns men *as well as* women, to say nothing of those grey areas in between. It is difficult to entertain the thought that the roles we assign and the expectations we have about these roles, grow out of

> a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life. (Geertz, 1973, p. 89)

to quote Clifford Geertz's definition of "culture". Most of all, perhaps, it is difficult to have the realization that "culture" and "gender" are not things that only pertain to other people, those people who wear different clothes, eat different foods, and have slightly different body shapes, but to oneself.

Still, the Afghanistan and Iraq experiences in particular have taught NATO countries and its partners the importance of culture and gender perspectives in operations, and since the UNSC passed resolution 1325 (2000) the fact that war affects men and women differently, that women's *and* men's participation in every part of society is important, beneficial and right, has gained widespread acceptance in NATO countries, at least officially.

The journey from official endorsement to a substantial change in culture can be long, however. Approximately two years ago, a cadet came to her commander at the Norwegian Military Academy and said that there were now too many incidents that made her feel uncomfortable and ill at ease in the Norwegian Armed Forces, and she wanted to quit. Her commander had taken pains and initiated several projects to create an atmosphere of tolerance, respect, and honesty among the cadets. The cadet was a very good student and as far as I know, one who did very well also in field exercises. I know nothing about the details of the experiences that made it impossible for this cadet to continue in the Armed Forces. But it is enough to know that she, along with too many others, have quit. Two weeks ago, the results of the 2020 survey of bullying and sexual harassment in the Armed Forces were presented. The survey shows that 73% of female students in the Armed Forces have experienced sexual harassment, what they call "sexual mnemonics", unwanted sexual attention or pressure, or sexual assault (Forsvaret, 2021).

A few years ago Olsson and Gizelis identified three key themes of Resolution 1325: participation, protection, and gender mainstreaming (2013, p. 427). The brief story of the cadet who quit the academy illustrates the fundamental problems when it comes to these three themes: How can we achieve participation on an equal footing if women cannot stand working in the organization? How can an organization properly protect women and girls in conflict zones if it cannot even protect its own? And how can one hope to achieve equal opportunities and equal representation when, as studies in the Norwegian as well as other NATO-country contexts show (Egnell & Alam, 2019; Fasting, 2011; Hellum, 2010), acceptance within the organizational culture relies on a person's willingness to accept the existing masculine standards?

There is, thus, a clear disjuncture between the public and official endorsement of gender mainstreaming and the importance of culture in military organizations and operations and the apparent difficulties of achieving substantive change. Why is it so difficult when everyone supports it? Of course, there are many and complex reasons. It seems to me, however, that the initiatives taken to achieve gender mainstreaming (and as will come to in due course, cultural understanding), which are entirely necessary for change and for learning, also uphold and accentuate the imbalances they seek to rectify. This double bind is most evident in gender mainstreaming efforts.

Since we have students and cadets as well as scholars in the audience, I will very briefly define the key terminology.

By culture I do not mean just the external markers, such as clothing, religious customs, conventions for social interaction etc., but rather the fundamental, but also constantly evolving mental and social structures which influence and even shape our attitudes and approaches to life. Let us read Geertz's definition, which I quoted above, again: culture is

> a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life. (Geertz, 1973, p. 89)

Gender concerns some of these "inherited conceptions". The term refers to the socially constructed conceptions about what constitutes femininity and masculinity. Gender is therefore an intrinsic a part of culture.

Gender mainstreaming refers to the process "of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programs, in all areas and at all levels" (United Nations, 1999, p. 24). The requirement to consider gender perspectives in operational planning, for instance, is thus a case of gender mainstreaming. Similarly, attempts to integrate gender perspectives in PME and attempts to achieve gender equality in military organizations are also gender mainstreaming efforts. Since gender, and consequently any "gender perspective", is intrinsically rooted in culture, any effort to come to terms with gender requires an understanding of culture and of how "the system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms" relates to

our “knowledge about and attitudes toward life”.

These inherited conceptions take various “symbolic forms”. One is, as we shall see shortly, language.

Let me first sketch how ‘everyone’ endorses gender mainstreaming in Norway. Since the UNSC resolution 1325, the Norwegian government under different party leadership has published four action plans on women, peace and security, all of which have had gender mainstreaming in the Armed Forces as a key goal (Regjeringen, 2006, 2011, 2015, 2019). Successive chiefs of defense have followed up by introducing for example various recruitment incentives, and by taking a clear stance against bullying, sexual discrimination, and sexual harassment and misconduct in the organization. All the way down the military hierarchy officers generally subscribe to the same principled stance against discrimination and harassment, and for gender equality. At least they do so officially.

The gender mainstreaming policies have had effect. Norway now has gender-neutral conscription, and women are starting to be promoted to the highest ranks in the Armed Forces. The first woman in Norway to be promoted to the military rank of admiral was head of the Norwegian Defense University College. We currently have a female commander of my campus, the Military Academy. She is the second female to serve as commander of the Academy, and there are currently women commanders of three other campuses as well: the Naval Academy, the Cyber Engineer School and the NCO School.

Unsurprisingly, these women have received a fair amount of attention for being women. The first woman Military Academy Commander, Col. Ingrid Gjerde, was naturally very supportive of the Women, Peace and Security agenda and promoted its place in the programmes at the academy, but she did not fly the gender mainstreaming flag very high. The former head of the Defense University College, Admiral Dedichen, however, certainly did. Let me give you just a few examples: She hosted regular events for the women’s network in the Armed Forces and female students and cadets were invited to participate. She allocated annual funds to gender equality initiatives in the Defense University College. Staff and students alike were eligible to apply, and the funds went towards a range of events and projects. Finally, the Admiral was an avid supporter of the female members of staff, and she even tried to challenge traditional gender roles by inviting the Chief of Defense out to lunch, with the media in tow, and paying for it herself, encouraging women generally to invite men out and pick up the bill.

The courses at the Defense University College are all interdisciplinary, but there are currently hardly any culture and gender elements in the current portfolio of courses. Earlier programmes, however, have had a lot of emphasis on culture and gender. Let me just mention a few things: At the Military Academy there was a separate course on cultural awareness with weekly session over three years, there was a series of lectures on gender and gender mainstreaming, and a week-long field exercise focused on peace-keeping and counterinsurgency where a civilian village with actual civilian playing civilians played a key role.

It is interesting, and discouraging, that gender and culture as topics have virtually disappeared, and a separate analysis of the reasons why ought to be done. One problem is, however, that gender mainstreaming is caught in a double bind: it is necessary to introduce measures to integrate gender perspectives in planning and operations and promote gender equality, but many of these efforts preserve and even accentuate the inequalities they seek to redress. A related phenomenon can be observed when integrating culture topics in education: Attempts to increase the cadets’ cultural sensitivity often seem to generate cultural stereotypes, static conceptions of cultural differences, and invite notions that “our” perception of the culturally “other” is a neutral, scientific, and objective one. This, I will argue, is a function of the preeminent carrier of culture and the primary system of “symbolic forms” in Geertz’ terminology: language.

Let me first illustrate what I call the double bind, with an example I use in my teaching. The Norwegian Armed Forces have a media archive. It is conceived of primarily as a resource for journalists, but the archive is open to everyone. It contains thousands of photos and many video clips from virtually all parts of the Armed Forces: its ceremonies, military operations and exercises, and personnel of all ranks. Every image in the archive has tags that describe it. These tags are, of course, intended make the archive searchable. If you are looking for a photo of a frigate, it helps that the photos of frigates show up when you enter keyword “frigate” in the search field.

However, some of the tags are very interesting from a gender mainstreaming perspective. Wholly in keeping with the official ambitions to focus on women in the Armed Forces, images with female officers and female soldiers are given the tags “female soldier”, “female officer” etc. Thus, if you search for “woman” in the archive, you get these results (see image 1). The photos show female soldiers and officers in practically all the same roles and situations as their male counterparts. The intended message from the Armed Forces media center is, I assume, that it is normal to have women in all of these roles, that women can do the same things as men, and that women are accepted and included in all units.

It is difficult to see how else one could normalize having women in the Armed Forces if one did not get to see women in all these roles. It is important to note, too, that “woman” or “female soldier” etc. are not the only search terms that will yield pictures of female soldiers. Every photo will have many tags, and so a photo of a female recruit in the King’s Guard, will also have the tag “King’s Guard”, such as in this photo (see image 2). A search for the King’s Guard will therefore have this photo of a female soldier as one of its results. As all listeners who know a Scandinavian language can see, too, this photo also has the tags “tired” and “cold”, which are common emotions for all soldiers.

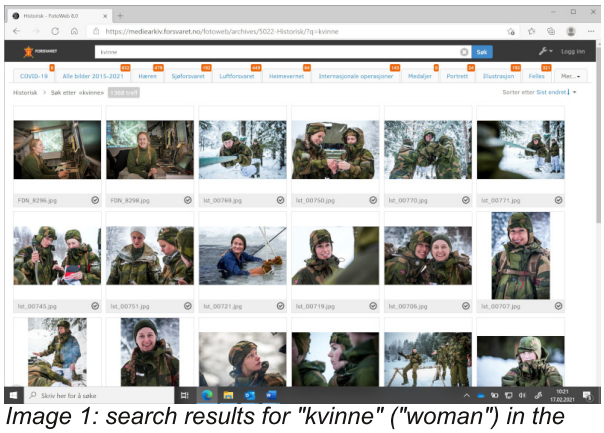

Image 1: search results for "kvinne" ("woman") in the Armed Forces Media Archive.

We can also sense this normalization effort in the photographic language of the photographers from the Armed Forces Media Center. It is very common to pick out female soldiers in a group, to have the female soldiers in focus and have the male soldiers blurred, as in these images (see images 3-5). In short, it is easy to recognize how the Media Center supports and contributes to the official gender mainstreaming policies.

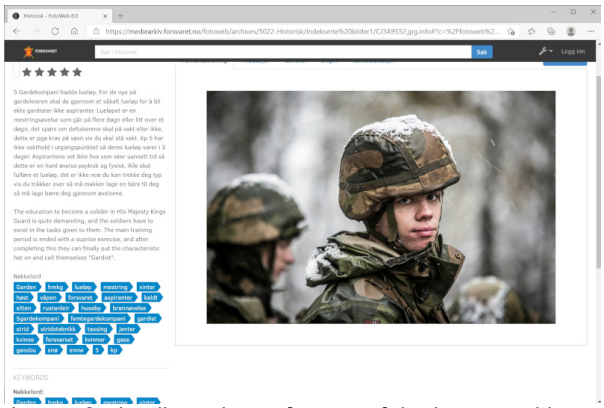

Image 2: details and tags for one of the images with the tag "kvinne" ("woman").

Importantly, however, it is necessary to acknowledge that these efforts also do at least two other things. First, these tags and this photographic focus on female soldiers in the media archive single out female soldiers as something noteworthy and newsworthy. Second, they establish a group of soldiers that is female as distinct from male. What is more, this group of female soldiers is not distinct from “male soldiers”, but from “soldiers”. We see that clearly if we search the media archive for “man”, like we searched for “woman” just now (see image 6). “Man” in the Armed Forces Media Archive sense means “civilian man” or even “foreign man”, and other hits mainly concern the word “man” used in the general sense of “person”, as in “man overboard” or “leaving one man on shore while diving” etc. Thus, the tagging practices establishes the distinct categories “female soldier” and “soldier”. Being woman in the Armed Forces thus means

Images 3-5: Female soldiers picked out photographically in a crowd.

being part of a special group, one that is labelled as distinct from the general and neutral category, and still a bit of an oddity. This phenomenon is part of the key insights about the social and linguistic structures that Simone de Beauvoir laid out in her landmark study *The Second Sex*. “[B]eing a man is”, as she said, “not a particularity” (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 25). It is rather the norm, whereas the particularity being a woman.

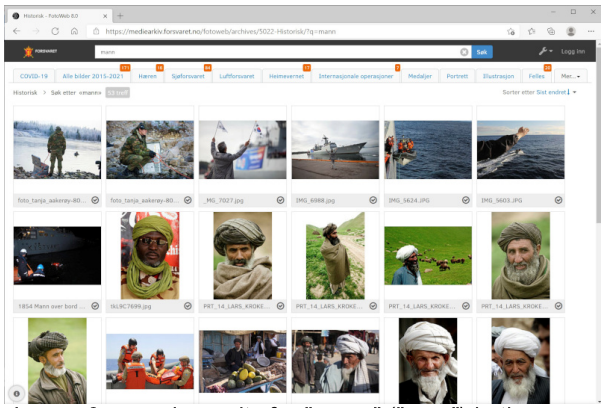

Image 6: search results for "mann" ("man") in the Armed Forces Media Archive.

The former head of the Armed Forces University College’s initiatives to promote women is caught in the same double bind. While it has certainly helped the career of some female members of staff, for example, the women-only arenas for networking, the earmarked funds, and her high-profile advocacy of gender equality have also contributed to accentuating the differences between men and women in the Armed Forces. Still it is my conviction that it is absolutely necessary to design and implement policies, and to introduce various measure to promote gender equality. To put it bluntly: we

would lose sight of some of the key issues if we were to speak of the "people, peace and security agenda" instead of the "women, peace and security agenda".

In the Norwegian setting, therefore, the problem is not a lack of will or, in principle, a lack of opportunity that represents the biggest challenge to gender mainstreaming. It is rather the difficulty of *thinking about* women as a category that is as natural in a military setting as the category of men. Action plans, policy and the efforts to normalize the participation of women in the Armed Forces are necessary, but also serve to establish women in the Armed Forces as a special category, one that is distinct from the general category. That is what I call the double bind. One cannot *not* show women in soldier roles if one is to change cultures and attitudes, but the very acts of showing women inadvertently also serve to establish women as a separate category from the norm.

Image 7: A female soldier in the King's Guard.

Compounding the problem, of course, is that there are differences in this world, and some of these differences concern the categories of women and men. That is a central premise of the women, peace and security agenda: that war and conflict affect men and women differently. The problematic differences, however, have to do with the socially constructed gender roles, such as the notion that only men are proper soldiers. I wonder if everyone would be able to identify this soldier as a female soldier from this photo alone, and yet, the tags accompanying the photo identifies her unequivocally as such, and with these tags all the deeply embedded cultural assumptions about what characterizes and constitutes women are activated. (see image 7)

One of the fundamental challenges to gender mainstreaming when everyone is for it, is therefore our thinking about the world, or again in the words of Clifford Geertz, the way in which "men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (op.cit.). How apposite in so many ways in this connection, too, that Geertz opted for the term "men", which is gendered and general at the same time!

Let me articulate the problem very concretely: In the discourse of gender mainstreaming in the Armed Forces and even in the general discourse of military life today, it is practically impossible to see this soldier outside the categories of "male" and "female" and all the assumptions about femininity and masculinity that are associated with these categories. What we face in our thinking when trying to achieve the goals of the women, peace and security agenda, is therefore also a problem of thinking. The cultural assumptions in our language limit our thinking. J.M. Coetzee, best known as novelist but also a notable academic, says about Isaac Newton's language when he tried to communicate his novel ideas about the forces of nature that we see:

> …signs of a wrestling to make the thought fit into the language, to make the language express the thought, signs perhaps even of an incapacity of language to express certain thoughts, or of thought unable to think itself out because of the limitations of its medium[.] (Coetzee, 1992, p. 184)

In other words, our gender mainstreaming efforts rub up against limitations of our language when the discourse is premised on a distinction between men and women.

The prominent Harvard Law Professor Janet Halley also identifies the fundamental distinction between male and female in feminism as one of the challenges to the very change feminism seeks to effect (Halley, 2008). Feminism in the USA, she says, "is dedicated to thinking in terms of male and female (masculine and feminine, etc.), noticing instances of male power and female subordination, and working on behalf of subordinated female interests" (2008, p. 8). We must recognize, I believe, that these analyses are required, but we must also acknowledge that these very analyses and our efforts to redress gender imbalances identify women as a separate group. Halley says, quite bluntly, that: "*[f]eminism* objectifies women" (2008, p. 346). Her analyses are directed at some very politicized forms of feminism, which is not the subject of my talk today. However, I think her proposed alternative to the formulaic approach to gender inequality is relevant to the question of how one should integrate gender and culture perspectives in officer training. We should, she says,

> … reveal the world as a normatively fraught, contradictory, conflictual place, a place where interests differ, change over time, and come into zero-sum conflicts, a place where all our decisions – even our decisions to abstain from deciding – shift social goods among highly contingent but pressing, urgent, vital interests. (Halley, 2008, p. 3)

The concept she introduces to describe this approach to understanding the world, is “theoretic incommensurability” (Halley, 2008, p. 3). The world is complex and broad generalizations generally (!) miss the mark. However, there is a deep human desire to simplify and organize the world in orderly categories. It is necessary at a policy level to think in terms of broader categories, such as “men” and “women”, “majority” and “minority groups”, and “us” and “them”. However, to achieve change in a culture and to educate people who are able to integrate gender perspectives in planning and operations, it is my conviction that one must go beyond the broad categories and interrogate the very premises for our thinking and understanding.

It is challenging to follow abstract reasoning. Let me therefore start by presenting a BA thesis project I recently had the privilege of supervising. Two cadets had the idea of replicating an experiment that has been conducted several times and in several different settings. The experiment consists in separating the participants into two groups and reading out a story involving a manager. Afterwards the groups respond to questions about this manager, whether the manager is trustworthy, competent etc. Both groups hear the exact same story. The only difference is the sex of the manager.

The responses to the subsequent questions reveal interesting differences in how a manager is perceived. The male manager is consistently perceived more positively by both men and women. The cadets at the Military Academy made small adjustments to the story to set it in a military context and ran the experiment on a group of fellow cadets, some 60 cadets in total. They generally found the same trends as others who have conducted this experiment have done, although on some indicators the trends were not as clear as in the experiment that inspired the cadets, which was run in a civilian university college. That is of course very interesting, and shows tentatively that our army cadets may have more positive views of female leaders than their civilian counterparts.

This BA project is interesting in many ways, and importantly not just for its findings. First, it is worth noting that the cadets came up with the idea for the project by themselves even if our BA programme, as I mentioned above, contains next to nothing about gender and culture. This shows that progress has been made in society as a whole. I should mention, too, perhaps, that these were two male cadets in a class with only some four or five female cadets. Second, the experiment involved quite a few cadets, who, faced with the results, got to experience their own cultural assumptions about gender, and not just read about the cultural assumptions of other people. Third, and most importantly, the project required the cadets to engage with the question of how one can use theory and scientific methods to understand our social world, and thereby enquire into the very conditions for knowledge.

This final point resonates with one of the key findings in a book I edited with Paula Holmes-Eber on the question of how to build cultural competence in officers (Enstad & Holmes-Eber, 2020). The approaches to teaching cultural competence that seem to have the biggest resilience to the changing interests of military organizations, are those that take a theoretical approach. Programmes that focus on area-specific and more external cultural markers, seem less successful. The value of theoretical approaches where students are exposed to ideas about the more profound aspects of culture was, furthermore, stressed by several contributors as the most viable road to cultural understanding.

To give just a couple of examples of the ways in which theory was brought to the topic of cultural understanding in a military context: One contributor, Rikke Haugegaard from the Danish Defense Academy, teaches her students anthropological methods and then assigns tasks where the students must use these methods (Haugegaard, 2020). This approach achieves the double effect of having students engage with the very conditions for knowledge about our social world, and of producing experiences of knowledge production within the frameworks of theory and science. Another contributor, Sine Holen, interrogated the different meanings of the word “threat” in military parlance and in the discourse of the academic field of peace and security (Holen, 2020).

If we go back to the rather curious search results for “man” in the Armed Forces media archive, we can see the outlines of what we could call the early and immature stages of cultural awareness. Used as a tag in the context of the Armed Forces media archive, the word “man” has somehow become a term for a civilian and culturally other person. When cadets begin to grapple with the nature of culture, it is my experience that they tend to identify culture and the effects of culture as something external to themselves. Learning about cultural differences seems to produce in cadets a notion that their own understanding is neutral and objective, and that culture is something that affects other people. This tendency resembles the dynamic of the gender mainstreaming discourse, which frames people in certain categories. It is a tendency that is reminiscent of Foucault’s “medical gaze” in his work *The Birth of the Clinic* (2003), which concerns the doctor’s objectivization of the patient’s body. Talking about and learning to see aspects of culture makes culture an object of your understanding and so external to oneself. Yet, it is unfeasible to achieve cultural understanding without it. This is the double bind of integrating culture in officer training.

Yet, as many contributors forcibly argued in the book *Warriors or peacekeepers*, exposing cadets to the theoretical frameworks for analysing and understanding culture, and, I will add, preferably seeing competing and even conflicting theoretical frameworks, has the potential to reveal to the cadets their own embeddedness in culture and the implications of this embeddedness. The BA project, I believe, is a good example of how that can be done in practice, even if this project was the cadets' own initiative and not something a teacher had requested.

It is therefore at this point that integration of culture and gender in officer training and gender mainstreaming efforts converge. Both rely on categories and a language that create distinctions, differences, and opposites. These same categories, however, and the use of them risk undermining the very thing they are meant to achieve. I have in this talk only mentioned the singling out of women as a distinct group from the norm in the case of gender mainstreaming efforts in the Armed Forces, and the tendency to see culture as something which applies to others and oneself as an external observer in the case of cultural understanding. When something becomes the object of interest, it becomes, precisely, an object external to yourself and outlined through the categories one uses to understand.

I have throughout my talk avoided the term "paradox" for the phenomena I have been describing. On the face of it, it might resemble a paradox that the efforts of the Armed Forces Media Centre, for example, to show women as an integral and natural part of the military organization and its operations only serve to make women stand out as a separate category from the norm. It is not a proper paradox, however. The bachelor project I told you about is, I believe, evidence that some progress has been made at least in our institution, towards a general recognition of some of the problems that gender mainstreaming seeks to address. That is progress, and a true paradox cannot be resolved through progress. Thus, the phenomena I have been describing are more properly described as historically contingent double binds.

What integration of culture and gender perspectives means, is, I believe, to develop the ability of our budding officers to recognize and understand precisely such mechanisms as the cadets' experiment revealed. That, in turn, requires an understanding of the conditions for knowledge and of one's own embeddedness in culture. There is, fundamentally, no neutral vantage-point to observe the world from, and thus, there is no *one* model, theoretical perspective or pedagogical approach that can achieve the desired change.

Hans-Georg Gadamer is perhaps the philosopher who has investigated the process of human understanding the most thoroughly. Understanding is, according to Gadamer, always historically situated. To achieve understanding, he says, we must be on guard against "the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 269). Any attempt to understand is a projection of meaning onto the thing one is attempting to understand (*ibid*.). This is a keen insight. Let us in closing return once again to the image of the female soldier in the King's Guard from the Armed Forces Media archive. As soon as we begin to make sense of the soldier from the King's Guard in terms of gender, we are victim to all the attendant "habits of thought" which guide our understanding of female and male. The world is complex, and it is tempting to propose simple solutions and take comfort in neatly organized categories. However, as the US satirist H.L. Mencken once said: "Every complex problem has a solution which is simple, direct, plausible—and wrong." To integrate culture and gender perspectives successfully in officer training, therefore, we must enable cadets to see beyond surface characteristics and understand the subtler effects of language and culture, that is to say to recognize one's *own* habits of thought as culturally and historically situated. I have emphasized the need to understand different and even conflicting theories to achieve that, but more importantly, perhaps, is what the experiment the cadets carried out illustrates: the need to *experience* and not just grasp intellectually that one is not an impartial objective observer of the world, but a person who sees the world against a particular horizon.

I realize that I have only scratched the surface of this discussion, but I will end here and welcome any questions or comments you might have.

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