

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Smart Women, Smart Power
**“Come One, Come All: Gender Neutrality in Sweden’s
Conscription”**

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FEATURING

Captain Jenny Ström

Commanding Officer of the 3rd Naval Warfare Flotilla in the Swedish Navy

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Kathleen
McInnis: This is Smart Women, Smart Power, a podcast that features conversations with some of the world's most powerful women.

Captain Jenny
Ström: And I also think it is very important for everybody to realize that we don't make a difference if you're a young man or young female because if you meet the standards you will be fit for the job.

So you don't have to worry about that. So if you just go to the mastering, try it out, and then if you fit to the job, you will get in.

Kathleen
McInnis: We feature thought leaders at all career levels where we explore, among other things, the many contributions that women make to the fields of international business, national security, foreign policy, and international development. Does having women in positions of power influence the outcomes of decisions in these fields? Why or why not? Join me, Dr. Kathleen McInnis, director of the Smart Women's Smart Power Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies for these incredible conversations.

This Smart Women, Smart Power podcast is supported by Lockheed Martin.

Today I am thrilled to welcome Captain Jenny Ström to the Smart Women, Smart Power podcast. Captain Ström joined the Royal Swedish Navy as an enlisted conscript in 1995. Captain Ström has attended various courses at the Swedish Naval Warfare College and the Swedish National Defense University, including the two year advanced studies course. And you've earned your master's in military science, so you're a master of the military.

Your tours at sea included training both conscripted and all professional crews, as well as being a part of a live anti-submarine operations in the Swedish littorals and a number of live mine counter operations in the Baltic Sea. Sweden has an incredible undersea presence in the Baltic. Right? Captain Ström is also a 2022 fellow with the Halifax International Security Forum's Peace with Women Fellowship. And that's where we are doing this podcast today at the Halifax International Security Forum 2022. So welcome.

Captain Jenny
Ström: Thank you. Thank you very much.

Kathleen
McInnis: It's such a delight to sit down with you. So I'd love to get a sense of what drew you to join the Swedish Navy in 1995.

Captain Jenny Ström: Actually, it was my mother who had a boss that now, so it was my mother's boss who was a reserve officer in the Navy. And so he like tipped, we are three sisters, so he tipped, so he said, "Don't your daughters want to join this summer camp with cadets -- sea cadets?"

Kathleen McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Captain Jenny Ström: And so my older sister, she did that. And then we all, the other two of us did also. And so actually me and my sister, we went applying and my older sister went applying and mastering together. And then she did her conscription time at, in a submarine and I did it on a mindsweeper. And then we both became officers, but she has left now, but she was a submariner and I ended up on the surface.

Kathleen McInnis: What was that experience like as a young woman? What was the gender balance like?

Captain Jenny Ström: In the Swedish Navy or in the Swedish Armed Forces, all our services has been open since the eighties.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Captain Jenny Ström: So there have been women, there have been women before. But, of course, in my course to become an officer I was, was 10% I think. And we are actually right now only 17% in total in the Swedish Armed Forces, female military personnel.

Kathleen McInnis: 17%?

Captain Jenny Ström: 17%. Everything has been open, but we haven't been able to attract.

Kathleen McInnis: Sure.

Captain Jenny Ström: The females in that extent that we would like to.

Kathleen McInnis: It's a career field that is so strongly associated with masculine and male dominated characteristics.

Captain Jenny Ström: Exactly.

Kathleen McInnis: But when we look at the force of the future and what we need to succeed in these strategic competitions it ain't just, you know, how far

you can carry a ruck. It's how can you outthink the adversary and do we have the team.

Captain Jenny Ström: Absolutely.

Kathleen McInnis: To turn to the decision, you want talk to today, which is your role in introducing general neutral conscription to the Swedish Armed Forces. So tell me what was happening at the time?

Captain Jenny Ström: We had a conscription service in the Swedish Armed Forces, before we have had it since long time ago, but 2010, we the force, laid to rest, that law, and we all had an all professional ground forces.

Kathleen McInnis: Well, and that was a trend across many of the western NATO-oriented, NATO partner militaries, right, to get rid of conscription because we wanted to have like lighter, more executionary forces...

Captain Jenny Ström: All professional. And the focus was abroad and to do peacekeeping. And, of course, we had, especially for the Navy, we have always been taking care of the defense at home. But we have been abroad also. But I would say, and then the security situation around the Baltic Sea has changed a lot as in whole Europe.

Kathleen McInnis: Yes.

Captain Jenny Ström: So 2017, the Government in Sweden decided to reintroduce conscription service. And at that time that there was gender neutral this time.

Kathleen McInnis: So the events, Russia's annexation of Crimea and the initiation of a proxy war, that was the beginning of like a rethinking of like-

Captain Jenny Ström: Yeah. And go back to national defense. That was the biggest focus. And then you need numbers.

Kathleen McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Captain Jenny Ström: And Sweden is not a member of NATO. We have applied now, but we are not <laugh> member yet. I really hope we will. But 2007, the decision was to reintroduce, and then it was natural that it was going to be gender-neutral. It involves every man and woman and it's a duty to serve. It is between when you're 16 to 47. But what happened is that

we don't need all of the young in Sweden, we have a quite small population. It's about 10 million.

So when you turn 18, we have a hundred thousand of them. And what happens is that they get to fill in a form that's obligated. So, they have to do it. If they don't do it, they will be put in short-term, yeah.

And in this form, you fill in your medical status. You fill in what, how do you feel about conscription, what are your school background, how much do you exercise, et cetera, et cetera. And from this, we need to take out right now, 8,000 of them to do their conscription. And that is what we need to build up our wartime organization. And in order to get 8,000, you have to try to muster, to take in and do the real tests. You have to try three in a half person for everyone. Let's say that we need 10,000, then we will have to 30,000.

Then we thought it's a gender-neutral, but it's also a gender-blind system. Because I-- when I say blind, sometimes I got a reaction during this last week that this is a negative thing. But I would say it's not a negative thing because gender-blind is that your gender is not something that is input in like a-

Kathleen
McInnis: Not a factor.

Captain Jenny
Ström: Not a factor in this. And we don't have any different standards. The standards we have is set to the job you're supposed to do. So it's the same standards for all men, women, depending on what job you're going to do. If you're going to be a Sonar operator on a ship, you have a specific standard.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Captain Jenny
Ström: If you're going to be a shooter in the infantry, there is a special standard for that. And that has nothing to do with if you're a male or a female. It is because the job you're going to do.

Kathleen
McInnis: So, is there a difference between gender-neutral and gender-blind?

Captain Jenny
Ström: So I would say it is a gender-neutral, but the system we use, it's blind for gender, that is what I mean with blind when picking out. And we are not allowed because it's a discrimination if you're picked out if you're a man or if you're a woman. So that is not allowed.

Kathleen
McInnis: Well, so you were commander and head of the armed forces
recruitment section?

Captain Jenny
Ström: Yeah. At this point. That was, and in this in this 2018, I was.

Kathleen
McInnis: In 2018, so the Swedish Parliament has decided to reintroduce
conscription and you are there figuring out how to implement it?

Captain Jenny
Ström: In 2018, so the Swedish Parliament has decided to reintroduce
conscription and you are there figuring out how to implement it?

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Captain Jenny
Ström: And at that time, in 2017 or 2018, we only had 17%.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Captain Jenny
Ström: That got into conscription and we were thinking, why is it like this?
Why do you get 50/50? So we did a lot of analyses, a lot of surveys, a lot
of deep interviews with the young females to understand this, why is it
like this?

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Captain Jenny
Ström: And then we understood, they don't have the knowledge, they don't
know what it means to do your conscription service. They don't
understand what it means and they don't think it's something for them
that when they are filling in their form they say, "I'm not motivated, I
don't want to do this. This is nothing for me." And we also realized that
the parents of these young women, they were also influencing them
because they had also a negative picture of, "This is not something for a
female, it's dangerous."

And the public, they based their liking from Hollywood movies and
stereotypes. And we also realized that young females, they thought
about us, the females that are in the armed forces, they thought we
were very well trained. We were super trained. We had no families, we
had no friends. We lived for our work. And they had like, nobody wants
to be that person <laugh>. So of course they don't wanna be in the
armed forces. <laugh>. So what we realized, we need to change this

picture. We are doing campaigns to change this, to try to show that you can be who you are when you are in the armed forces.

Kathleen
McInnis: Right.

Captain Jenny
Ström: We need diverse. We need everybody. There is a job for everyone.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah. How did you start tackling that?

Captain Jenny
Ström: We did in our campaigns, for example, we had a campaign, so some years ago that was called "Come As You Are." And then we showed different types of persons that are in the armed forces right now, females and males, that are not the stereotype. And we had them on big display in the subway and in the newspaper and in TV commercials also. So that is how we have been working on this to try to change this.

The biggest decision I would say, we understood we need to get to them before they get this survey. And we needed to go out in schools, in forms and et cetera. So what we did was that we decided what, that we should have special soldiers and sailors that are dedicated to be school information.

We created a role for a soldier, a soldier or sailor because they can be from the naval also. And their mission is just to go out in schools. And we also realized that they need to be young. They need to be someone that the person sitting in school in the classroom can recognize themselves with. Preferably one woman and one man. That we wanted them to be recently had on their basic training. The basic training in Sweden is between 9 and 15 months.

Kathleen
McInnis: Okay.

Captain Jenny
Ström: So after that, then you can be employed as a professional soldier or go to be a specialist officer or NCO or officer.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Captain Jenny
Ström: And this is like a role for a soldier. So we hire them, we have them spread all over the country and schools can register. We want you to come to us and we advertise for them.

And then they go out in schools and inform about the Swedish Armed Forces, about the basic training, about the mastering, how does that work and what expectations so they can give a more true picture.

Kathleen
McInnis: Of what it's really like.

Captain Jenny
Ström: Yeah. What it is like really like, and what we do also is that we do surveys after we do this yearly to follow it up. The willingness to do has raised enormous, but not just from the females, also from the males across the board, because they don't know either what it's like. The young men doesn't tend to be intimidated by that.

Kathleen
McInnis: Right.

Captain Jenny
Ström: It's not just the females. So that is what we needed to change. So we have seen results, as I said, in 2018, we had 17% females who joined the armed forces. And this year we had 24%.

Kathleen
McInnis: Wow.

Captain Jenny
Ström: So we are going up.

Kathleen
McInnis: It's an upward trend.

Captain Jenny
Ström: Yeah. And we have also had a lot of discussions with Norway because they did our journey, but they started 2015 and they are over 30% in Norway now.

Kathleen
McInnis: Really?

Captain Jenny
Ström: Females doing their conscription. So we are, I'm thinking because what we've also seen is that when you have a friend or you have someone that you know, sister, brother has done this, then you get more motivated, then you got more positive. So we also think that this exchange does take time and change of perception of how the armed forces is like.

Kathleen
McInnis: And it sort of loops back to how you joined, right?

Captain Jenny
Ström: Yeah.

Kathleen
McInnis: It's that personal connection. It is so many other stories, you know, of joining the service or joining, you know, this field of national security. It

comes down to being introduced by the people and these human connections that are so important.

Captain Jenny Ström: Yeah, absolutely. And I also think it is very important for everybody to realize that we don't make a difference if you're a young man or young female because if you meet the standards, you will be fit for the job.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah.

Captain Jenny Ström: So you don't have to worry about that. So if you just go to the mastering, try it out, and then if you fit to the job, you will get in. So I think that's also very important. Not to say that we need more females. That's, and then we bring them in and, but you have to compete at the same, because, otherwise, it's not going to be equal. It's not going to be good.

Kathleen McInnis: Right. And that will have reverberations across the force.

Captain Jenny Ström: Yeah.

Kathleen McInnis: And how long does the term of conscription last?

Captain Jenny Ström: You join and then you do from 9 until up to 15 months training.

Kathleen McInnis: Okay.

Captain Jenny Ström: That's the basic training. And then you become what I said, you could be a Sonar operator on board a ship. You can be a tutor, you can be a medic, and then you're replaced in the wartime organization.

And so if you don't continue in the Swedish Armed Forces, you will still have like an obligation. So you will be called in every third year to train again to keep up your skills. Then after about ten years, you will fall out of the system.

Kathleen McInnis: Okay. So it's a ten year sort of--

Captain Jenny Ström: So if we, and then if we have a mobilization, we will call them in and they, you have extra units, but after your conscription service, you can also apply to be a soldier, a professional soldier.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Captain Jenny
Ström: Because we have full-time units also. All the naval units. We only have full-time sailors on board. Or you can apply to become an officer and go to officers training or specialist officers as we called it. That's equivalent to NCOs.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Captain Jenny
Ström: And then you do a one and a half year training or to become an officers is three years training.

Kathleen
McInnis: So we've talked about equal standards and gender blind. But as careers progress, as people age in the system, women tend to have different family requirements and biological--

Captain Jenny
Ström: Yeah. But I would say this is something we also discovered in the discussions during the last weeks, because Sweden is a country where we don't have mother's leave, for example, we have parental leave. For example, me and my husband, we split it, our parental leave.

Dr McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Captain Jenny
Ström: So I was home ten months and he was home nine months. And in the Swedish society, the thought is that everybody has to work, men and women.

Kathleen
McInnis: Okay.

Captain Jenny
Ström: So we have a very developed childcare system and everything. But I feel that it is expectations on females to take a bigger responsibility. But we have come further, I would say, compared to many other countries, depending on the couple, of course. But we have more equal that it's not expected. I expect all my males to take parental leave, for example.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Captain Jenny
Ström: The young people I have. That I have to be taken in to account and I have to take in an account for the females also of course. There's no

problems with it, but we have to think about the expectations from the society also.

And now I am a commander of the 3rd Naval Warfare Flotilla. So I have personnel and I have co-squadron and MCM on a supply squad staff.

Kathleen
McInnis: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Captain Jenny
Ström: And within my units we have 23% female within my flotilla. And we have a lot of young mothers that are out there working on border ships. And, but it's tough for the men also. I don't always think that we should do it to a women's question. It's, it's a parental question.

Kathleen
McInnis: That's interesting.

Captain Jenny
Ström: Yeah.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah. So returning to the set of decisions about gender neutrality in the conscription environment, do you believe or do you feel that being a woman impacted how you approached that problem set and the decisions associated with it?

Captain Jenny
Ström: I've been thinking about that and I think yes, a little bit because I think I could understand the young females, how their perception, but I'm also, I mean, I'm trained, I've become part of the system, so I don't see everything, but I think maybe a little bit yes. To be able to understand that they have this because fear and not thinking that they should fit in, et cetera. I was told that when I did my mastering.

Kathleen
McInnis: Yeah.

Captain Jenny
Ström: I was told that "Oh no, not on my sweeper. No, no, no. No females under my sweeper. That's too hard for you. Don't you want to do something else like communications or something that's so much more suitable for--And I was then, "You don't say that to me."

Kathleen
McInnis: <laugh>

Captain Jenny
Ström: Then I was, "No, I really, I'm going to do that." <laugh>. "Watch me." <laugh>.

Kathleen
McInnis: Thank you so much for being on our podcast today. This has been a wonderful conversation. And enjoy Halifax.

Captain Jenny
Ström: Oh, thank you very much.

Kathleen
McInnis: Subscribe to the Smart Women, Smart Power podcast on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to great content. Be sure to follow us on Twitter @smartwomen, or you can follow me on Twitter @kjmccinnis1. Thanks for listening and join us next time. This Smart Women, Smart Power podcast is supported by Lockheed Martin.

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