Female Engagement Teams
A CCOE Observation Paper

Purpose & Introduction:

This observation paper looks into what extent was the concept of Female Engagement Teams successful, what lessons can be learned, and recommends actions to be taken.

Since the introduction of UN Resolution 1325, which recognizes the importance of involving women in peace and security issues, there has been an increased focus on gender issues amongst NATO nations. Including a gender perspective in operations, that focuses on both men and women, has many benefits; including increased awareness of the operational theatre, inclusiveness, and increased stability. Furthermore, the CIMIC Centre of Excellence (Ccoe 2013) argues that effective missions “require that all of the different groups, people from different ages, sexes, social status, and ethnicities, in the affected area are heard and respected”. This can be achieved through the recognition of gender relations. The Dutch Gender Advisor Ella Van Den Heuvel argues that “in most of the missions our mandate is protecting civilians, but you can’t do this alone as troops, you need to cooperate with the civilians to make this happen”. For this reason, gender must be an integral part of civil-military relations.

One policy used amongst the US and UK military to introduce a gender perspective is the implementation of Female Engagement Teams in Afghanistan. Female Engagement Teams (FET) are all female teams aiming to increase interaction with the local population, with a focus on local women. Female Engagement Teams were first introduced in Iraq under the name of “Lionesses” with the aim of more culturally sensitive engagement with Iraqi women (Cook 2015).

This was deemed successful and the female engagement teams were implemented in Afghanistan. The idea is that through increased interaction with the local population and specifically women, NATO forces will gain more support. However, the extent of their success is unclear, with many female engagement teams receiving little guidance and no clear aims and goals.
Introduction to literature:

Gender is complex, with power relations shaping the experiences of both women and men within the military. It is important to recognize the patterns of gender relations within the military, to fully understand the successes and limitations of the female engagement teams. An important element of the US female engagement teams is that before 2013, women were banned from combat. It is argued by many academics that women in the military are often seen as the ‘protected’ and have thus been excluded from certain aspects of military service, like combat exclusion. Arguably, the female engagement teams could be seen as a form of division between male and female soldiers within Afghanistan, where women are given the task of engagement, a task more aligned with the female stereotypes. This risks further portraying women as nonviolent and ‘the protector’.

Furthermore, through the use of female-only teams, there is a risk of further segregating women. One of the main reasons for this is that when women are “a small extremely visible part of the workforce- and therefore are treated as symbols, not individuals, differences are further exaggerated” (Grube-Farrell 2002). By having women segregated into separate teams, not only are differences between female and male soldiers more prominent but prevents full integration into the military, further depicting women as a form of tokenism.

This ODCR paper will be using the idea of ‘regendering’ the military as an analytical framework. By using this concept, the complexities of the gender within the military can be further understood. The main idea behind regendering the military is challenging the stereotypes associated with being masculine and feminine (Duncanson 2015). For example, women being perceived as ‘protected’ and the victim. Military institutions are arguably inherently masculine, therefore for women’s participation to increase the characteristics of femininity and masculinity need to be broken down. The main argument for ‘regendering’ the military is that it allows for structural change within the institution.

Observation:

The complexity of different civil-military environments is closely linked with gender relations. Despite this, the incorporation of gender mainstreaming within missions has been limited. One example is the use of Female Engagement Teams by the UK and US militaries to ‘win the hearts and minds’ of the local Afghan population. The use of female engagement teams was flawed and many lessons can be learned from the use of these teams.
Individual Teams/ Mixed teams: How successful was the concept of female engagement teams? What are alternative solutions?

The Female Engagement Teams were established by the UK and US militaries as a form of greater outreach to the local Afghan population. The idea was, that through the use of Female Engagement Teams the military would have access to the wider population, especially Afghan women. Although there has been mixed reporting on the use of female engagement teams, the consensus is that the use of the teams had many limitations.

Although a lot of the literature is critical about the use of female engagement teams, there have been examples of success. For example, in August 2010, a female engagement member within the Marine Expeditionary Force received intel from a male informant about the location of IED’s and Taliban supporters (Whitman 2012). One of the main reasons for this is because local Afghans perceived the FET’s differently than their male counterparts and were thus less likely to see them as a threat. According to Dyvik (2013), the women within the female engagement teams were perceived as a ‘third gender’ as they were not perceived as the traditional women but were not seen as a traditional soldier either. Therefore, local Afghan men were more likely to engage with women within the engagement teams. As a result, there were opportunities to create relationships with the local population. This links closely with the idea of ‘regendering’, through the local Afghan people not recognizing characteristics typically associated with women, engagement with the local population increased. However, it is important to note that not all engagements with the local population were successful and some of the information provided by the local population was already known to the military.

The literature has shown that the success of individual Female Engagement Teams relied heavily on appropriate training and resources. One of the underlying assumptions of the FET is that all women have an understanding and interest in gender issues. Even though the female engagement teams expected women to volunteer to be in the teams, this does not ensure that all women are concerned with gender issues. Especially considering when the FET’s were first implemented, US women were restricted from combat and thus participation within the FET allowed for increased engagement within the operational environment (Dyvik 2013). It is important to note that the FET’s were not only an attempt at increasing engagement with the local population but were also an attempt at more effective gender mainstreaming within the military. The idea was that increased female participation of women through the creation of the teams would lead to the military being more gender-responsive (Whitman 2012). This assumption is based on gender stereotypes and does not recognize that those female soldiers may have different reasons for joining the female engagement teams. However, without effective training on gender issues, including education on the gender relations between men and women, it is unclear to what extent this goal can be met. Being a woman is not synonymous with an interest and knowledge of gender.

Another reason for the failures of the female engagement teams was the lack of structure and authority within the female engagement teams. One of the main structural issues with the female engagement teams was the lack of command support and mission clarity (Erwin 2012). The Female Engagement Teams were compromised of female volunteers, this meant that FET members had their separate units and when necessary left their units to be part of the FET’s. The FET’s were often not part of operational planning and therefore not part of the main military activities, which meant the teams had little authority or ability to address concerns voiced by the local people (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam 2014). This did not only limit the team’s capabilities but also meant that many empty promises were made, risking the trust and relationships made through the use of the FET.

As mentioned above, one of the main limitations of the use of female engagement teams was that they were comprised of women who often had inadequate training for the role. For this reason, other nations incorporated the idea of mixed teams, rather than female-only teams. Great Britain followed that example. (Olsson 2009). Another example of the use of mixed teams are the Dutch Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan. The use of mixed teams still allows communication with local Afghan women, without it being purely a woman’s issue. Mariett Schurman, the former NATO Special Representative for Gender, claims that it is best to have mixed teams on a contextual basis. Meaning that female-only teams can be formed on an ad hoc basis if necessary. As a result, gender is not purely a woman’s issue but instead encourages both men and women to consider the impact gender has on operations. Ella Van Den Heuvel, the gender advisor to the Dutch military argues that “we are stronger and more effective as a force if we operate in mixed teams”. Arguably, the use of mixed teams overcomes the limitations identified within the female engagement teams.
Discussion:

Host Nation: What was the response of the host nation? How did they impact the effectiveness of the Female Engagement Teams?

The response and the knowledge and understanding of the host nation plays a large role in the success of the female engagement team. In the case of Afghanistan, the Female Engagement Teams often misunderstood and made incorrect assumptions about the local population, mainly due to lack of training and interaction with local civil society and non-governmental organisations. An example of this is the misunderstanding of what a ‘shura’ is (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam 2014). Shura’s are usually formal meetings conflict and political resolution. The Female Engagement Teams would refer to any congregation of women as shuras which would imply significance to these congregations regardless of their purpose (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam 2014). This undermines the cultural importance of Shuras and risks portraying engagements as more significant than what they are.

Another example of a lack of training on local culture and norms is the reporting of FET members who were invited to a local wedding, attempting to interview the bridal party during the ceremony (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam 2014). This occurred after the FET wrongly interpreted the Afghan cultural of hospitality as support for the FET. This could have been avoided through cultural awareness. Furthermore, this illustrates the lack of mission clarity for the FET’s, as now reflecting on this, this would not have been appropriate in most cultures. This is another example of the importance of appropriate training on the culture of the host nation to avoid misreporting of cultural and local habits.

One of the underlying assumptions of the FET is that through engagement with local women, the teams could win the ‘hearts and minds’ of the local population. The US and UK FET assumed that the Afghan women could be easily influenced and would provide valuable information to the military. Thus, undermining their agency. These assumptions are especially evident in the language used to describe the local Afghan women. For example, Afghan women are often described as being ‘discovered’ portraying Afghan women waiting to be found by foreign military personnel. This risks ‘othering’ the local Afghan woman and risks undermining the knowledge and status of the women.

Furthermore, it has been reported that the FET had little interaction with local NGOs and civil society and as a result missed out on useful information on local practices and cultures (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam 2014). The sharing of best practices could have avoided the misinterpretation of cultural practices.

Discussion:

Military: How did the military culture impact the effectiveness of Female Engagement Teams? (consider both men and women)

Even though the use of female engagement teams has the potential of increasing the number of women in the military, military culture can unintentionally hinder the influence and aims of the female engagement teams. Many academics argue that the military is 'inherently masculine' where characteristics associated with men (for example strength) are also associated with the 'perfect soldier' (Solhjell 2013). Whereas female stereotypical characteristics, such as compassion can be looked down upon. As female engagement teams are seen as a form of increasing female participation out in the field, the teams do not consider how the masculine nature of the military may hinder this. For example, there has been reporting of cases where the commander responsible for the female engagement teams did not recognize the potential and significance such teams may hold due to the arguably compassionate nature (purely engagement with the local population) of these teams (Jones 2013). Furthermore, by placing women into separate teams the inherently masculine nature will likely persist (Grube-Farrell 2002). This is closely linked to the theory of 'regendering' mentioned above, through recognizing how gender stereotypes and characteristics shape elements such as the female engagement teams, hindrances can be overcome. Without recognizing how structural factors within the military, such as masculinity impact the implementation of FET, the full potential cannot be met.
One of the main benefits of the use of female engagement teams is that it increases the number of trained female military interacting with the local population. Furthermore, it is argued that through using gender stereotypes, for example, women being caring/not violent and traditionally not in the military, the female engagement teams can easily interact with the local population (Whitman 2012). Although the use of gender stereotypes can help reach the FET aims, it risks further perpetuating gender stereotypes within society and the military as a whole. Without recognizing the role gender stereotypes play within gender mainstreaming and gender-related activities, stereotypes like the military male and women as the victim will continue. And risks further portraying women as not real soldiers but instead as a means to reach military goals.

The success of the female engagement teams is dependent on the commanders. Without proper leadership and acknowledgement of the teams, the full potential of the female engagement teams cannot be reached. Authors like Harding (2012) have argued that the effectiveness is limited by commanders rather than the response from the local Afghan people. Without proper leadership and support the female engagement teams cannot be fully utilized. Grube–Farell (2002) argues that "whenever a majority controls the organizational group and members who are tokens are being integrated, strong leadership is needed to manage difficulties". Although the women in FET are not necessary 'tokens', Grube-Farell highlights the importance of strong leadership for all-female teams (who are the minority). For this reason, leadership must recognize the importance of gender mainstreaming within military operations and the importance of meaningful engagements with the local community, not only for specific operations. It is also important for commanders to recognize that gender constitutes of both men and women, and it is therefore essential that male military personnel are involved as well. Encouraging male involvement with gender-related issues can be achieved through the use of mixed engagement teams.

Monitoring and Evaluation:

Monitoring and evaluation of projects and missions are essential to ensure success and that mistakes are not repeated. Despite this, there was no clear method for reporting the FET engagement with the local population (Coll 2012). One of the main reasons for this is that due to the nature of the program and female military personnel wanting to succeed, any activities would often be reported as a success. The pressure to perform well led to positive reporting (Coll 2012). Furthermore, as the program did not have much structure and the woman had very little guidance and leadership it was unclear what constituted a success. Considering the aim of the female engagement teams was to interact with Afghan women, any interaction could be considered as successful, not considering how meaningful the interaction with the local population was. Furthermore, as the deployment frames were often less than a year, this meant that there was a pressure for quick results, further encouraging the female engagement teams to report successes rather than failures (Olsson 2009). The pressure for women to impress their commanders led to inaccurate reporting of female engagement teams.

Another downfall of the assessment of the female engagement teams is that there no baseline studies were conducted (Coll 2012). This meant that it was unclear how much influence the female engagement teams had and if anything had changed. Furthermore, a baseline study would have allowed for the female engagement teams to have a wider understanding of the local population before the program and would have allowed further understanding of their needs and interests. The lack of understanding before the implementation of the female engagement teams hindered the assessment of them.
Conclusion:

The implementation of the female engagement teams had both positive and negative aspects. Positive aspects include the increase of female military personnel engaging with the local population and access to information that might not have been available otherwise. Furthermore, the female engagement teams promoted female participation within the military, which arguably led to an increased gender perspective. The female engagement teams also led to an increase in intel due to the Afghan people viewing female soldiers as a ‘third gender’.

Despite this, limitations remained mainly due to structural issues. For example, lack of mission clarity, little training on the operational area and inaccurate monitoring and evaluation. Academic literature and professionals within women, peace, and security argue that mixed teams can overcome these issues, through both male and female soldiers engaging with the local population and when necessary using female only teams on an ad hoc basis. Mixed teams can prevent some of the limitations of the female-only teams reoccurring, however, it is important to note that cultural awareness still needs to be emphasized and ensured.

Through the theory of ‘regendering the military’, the role of gender within the female engagement teams was further understood. The breakdown of gender stereotypes and characteristics allows for a comprehensive understanding of why the female engagement teams were accepted by certain Afghan people, the negative responses from some commanders and how the lack of cultural knowledge negatively impacted their success. As the female engagement teams were largely created on the idea that female soldiers can help increase engagement with the local population, it is important to break down these gender characteristics and understand how it can impact the success of future mixed engagement teams.

The complexity of the nature of female engagement teams was underestimated. However, through recognizing best practices and their limitations, future successful engagement with the local population can be achieved.

Recommendation: Military

- Before deployment, ensure all personnel has basic training on gender issues. Military personnel could partake in the “ADL 169 Improving Operational Effectiveness by Integrating Gender Perspective”.
- Use mixed teams for engagement with the local population, only use female-only teams on an ad hoc basis.
- When selecting men and women for the mixed team, ensure they have efficient knowledge of gender issues and the operational environment. Team members should not be selected based off of their gender but because of their capabilities to deliver the task.
- Through the development of a clear strategy and instructions of the use of mixed teams, encourage leadership to actively engage with the operations. For example, providing recognition for the effective implementation of such policies.
- Provide criteria on assessing the relevance of the use of mixed teams and whether it would be useful to use female engagement teams on an ad hoc basis, for example when engaging with women within the household. This can prevent the unnecessary use of female-only teams and can ensure the relevance of engagements. Criteria can include the likelihood of receiving useful information, how conservative the areas are, and whether the members of the team have the relevant information and experience to engage with the particular local population.
- Promote the use of ‘femocrats’ within teams. Femocrats are people who are particularly interested in gender alongside their daily work. Femocrats can help identify any practices within the teams that would be detrimental to effective gender mainstreaming. Femocrats can help create a more gender-aware environment at a more personal level.
- Ask the gender advisor to assess if any of the policies used within the mixed teams are based on assumptions or stereotypes. The gender advisor can suggest ways to improve this. This will prevent further perpetuating gender stereotypes or base operations off assumptions.
Recommendation: The Military’s relationship with the Host Nation

- Designate certain members of the team with the task to create a close relationship with local leaders. This can be useful in assessing the relevance of the female engagement teams, building trust within the community and collect relevant information prior to the engagement.

- Conduct an in-depth baseline study prior to engagement with the local population. This should be done in smaller teams, to avoid intimidation and to help build trust. The baseline study will assess factors such as the level of engagement/trust prior to the use of the mixed teams, important cultural/religious practices that are particular to that area that may affect engagement with the local population and will help build trust through slow and steady engagement.

- When engaging with the local population ensure that engagement is useful for both parties; work with the locals rather than from the locals. Try to understand their needs and interests and offer solutions/support if applicable. Work closely with leadership to gain further understanding to what extent support can be provided.

- Engage with local civil society and non-governmental organizations to collect any relevant information that can help understand the local population and the operational environment. Furthermore, engagement with the local civil society and non-governmental organization can help assess whether it is relevant to use female-only teams on an ad hoc basis or mixed teams.

References:


Rohwerder, B. (2015). Lessons From Female Engagement Teams. GSDRC.
