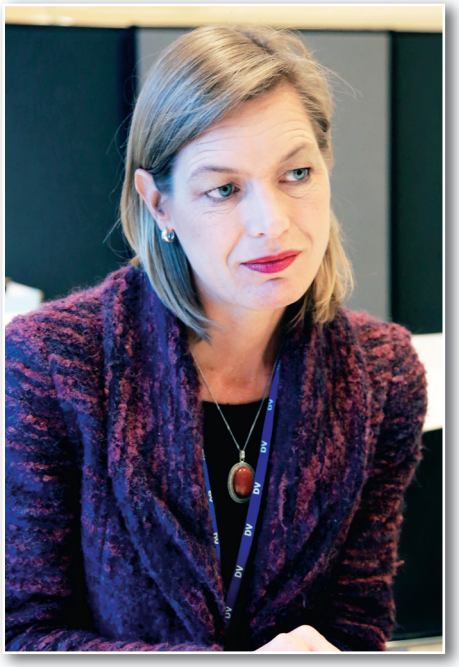

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Ambassador Marriët Schuurman

NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for Women, Peace and Security

1325 women | peace | security

Ambassador Marriët Schuurman, the NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for Women, Peace and Security, visited the Joint Warfare Centre (JWC) on 5 December 2016 to meet the Centre's leadership, learn more about its training mission and explore future cooperation in JWC-directed strategic/operational level exercises, focusing on integration of gender in Crisis Management and Collective Defence. In meetings with JWC leadership, she highlighted the importance of implementing a gender perspective into our daily NATO work and also as a strategic military training objective in exercises with increasingly complex scenarios, expanding on the Centre's key role in integrating gender into the analysis, planning and execution of all TRIDENT Series of Exercises.

By Inci Kucukaksoy, JWC PAO

Ambassador Schuurman, thank you for this interview opportunity. Recently, I conducted an interview with Admiral Michelle Howard, Commander of JFC Naples. She and Brigadier General Giselle Wilz, Commander of NATO HQ Sarajevo, are the only women Commanders in NATO right now. Why do we have so few women leaders?

— First, let me say that also Lieutenant General Chris Whitecross, currently Commander of the Canadian Military Personnel Command, will join us next year and assume command of the NATO Defence College. She has been elected by the Military Committee and is due to start at the end of July 2017. Gender balance, whether in allied armed forces or in civilian work force, has been recognized as a concern indeed, in that we want to be both inclusive and diverse and also, as we always say, gender balance improves performance and mixed teams perform better. Diversity is very important, especially female leadership at the top, which will attract higher numbers of talented people we want for NATO. But, it's not only a problem on the military side. Other international organisations, also those that don't have a military branch, have the same problem. After ten years of progress, between 2000 and 2010, the percentage of women in leadership positions within NATO is still at 11%. The key thing is that on the military side, if you look at what the nations have in terms of capacity, the representation of women in top positions, in particular at flag officer level, is still a very low percentage of what's on offer. We also know that this percentage will not grow automatically. Women's access to the armed forces,

for most Allies, began during or after Second World War. I think, on the military side, there is a shared common concern about not only how to *recruit* women, but also about how to *retain* women, and how to make sure that we indeed promote on the basis of merit rather than gender. We need to understand what the possible barriers are in the different systems that may cause a lower advancement of women or higher departure rates. If you lose talented men and women, you lose key human capital, so the issue is then how do we keep that investment. Overall, there are a lot of lessons learned being shared between different national systems on how not only to recruit, but particularly on how to retain women and advance them as leaders in senior positions, because we know it's good for the organisation if there is more mixed leadership. And, NATO will benefit from these efforts. Currently, when examined in terms of percentages, Canada has the highest percentage of female Generals and the U.S. the highest number of female Generals. It is, therefore, not surprising at all that our first female leadership on the military side comes from Canada and the U.S. We do hope, however, to increase the awareness and activism in other Alliance member states so as to make them seriously look and learn from best practices globally amongst Allies and Partner Nations, and also to better balance our systems regarding gender and better promote women to senior positions.

NATO endorsed an Action Plan as a result of its commitment to support United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325. This is followed up with the Bi-Strategic Directive 40-1, integrating UNSCR 1325 and Gender Perspective into the NATO Command Structure. Where does NATO stand today? What more needs to be done?

— There is a hierarchy of guidance in our own house. We have a policy which was endorsed in Wales in 2014, and we have a new two-year Action Plan on that policy, which was endorsed in Warsaw. That's basically the framework; it's a very Comprehensive Approach to better integrate gender perspectives and to better reduce barriers to women's active and full participation in our own structures. I have always emphasised that the policy and the Action Plan are not only for NATO as institution, but that they have been endorsed by all Allies plus Partner Nations in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, as well as six partners across the globe. As a result, it's a coalition of 55 nations that have signed up to our current Action Plan. The revision of Bi Strategic Command Directive 40-1 has to reflect the latest priorities of the Action Plan. A part of the regular update is to make sure that the Directive is aligned with the latest policy thinking and the Action Plan. In terms of priorities, I think there are two aspects here: the short term is to make sure that the lessons we learned on gender relevance, particularly from Crisis Management Operations, are taken forward by applying the gender lens to the security challenges of today, which are hybrid threats from the south and the east. Simply said, our first priority is to make the gender perspective and UNSCR 1325 relevant as a tool to better deliver our core task, including Collective Defence. That's the new kid on the block in terms of gender mainstreaming. Our longer-term priority is to make gender awareness and gender equality core business and to turn gender awareness and gender analysis into a basic tool to continue to deliver a big effort in education, training, exercises and evaluation with a view to really ensuring we *internalize* this way of thinking; and for everybody across the board to have a basic awareness of what gender is, how it affects their work and how it can be a tool to help heighten their work performance. Briefly put, it is all about making sure that everybody knows how gender affects their impact and how they can use the gender lens to do a better job. In that regard, the longer-term objective is basically making me redundant.

Why is gender a defining topic of our age?

— Well, yes, indeed it is. I think the answer lies in the times we live in. We see so many certainties being put under stress, and gender is always played with, as a defining aspect of any society. We face hybrid threats attempting to actively undermine the very foundation of our societies, of our cohesion, and to a certain extent to divide us, visibly banking on the vulnerabilities and the weaknesses of our societies, out of which the biggest weakness is growing inequality, including growing gender inequality. If peace, freedom and security are based on equal rights and opportunities and on fundamental freedoms, we have to strengthen our core to make ourselves resilient to those hybrid threats that try to attack and challenge that foundation. From that perspective, it doesn't matter if the threat is the kind of information warfare coming from Russia or the kind of information warfare and active recruitment performed by terrorist groups like Da'esh, who somehow understands gender better than we do. From a peace and security perspective and not only from that of the larger debate in society, rethinking how we face those challenges and how we respond, has everything to do with how we interrelate, with or without inclusion; how people feel committed to and recognise themselves in NATO as a collective defence organisation; how they react to threats; where their insecurity is; how we become vulnerable to such disruptive and distractive narratives, and what we can do to build that resilience. It also has to do with the core values on which we build our organisation and other international organisations as a whole, so it is all the more relevant. The key thing to take away is that gender equality is relevant not only to Afghanistan, but to all of us because it forms one of the bases of our freedom.

At the operational level, the focus is on gender awareness and integrating gender into operational planning. This includes measures of protection of women and children during armed conflict. But our collective defence and crisis response scenarios are very complex and broad, set in the Baltics, where gender issues are less acute and women are pretty well represented. Thus, the gender perspective is not really operationalized during exercises despite gender being a key training objective. So, how can we challenge Training Audiences more in a setting which has a high level of gender equality? What are your recommendations?

— Even the most gender-equal country, which is currently Iceland, still sees inequalities, so there is no country or culture where men and women are one hundred per cent equal. Obviously, there are countries where the gap is much bigger. The point here is not to address that gap, but rather to understand how gender roles, perceptions and prejudices influence our security and peace and stability in order to better understand how our opponents exploit the weaknesses and flaws of our societies and exacerbate them in order to divide and rule. Even in the Baltics, you see a rather active effort to target Russian speaking minorities. The way in which these minorities are targeted in Russian language commercial TV etc., is often very gendered, playing out so-called traditional values

Major General Andrzej Reudowicz, Rear Admiral Brad Skillman and JWC's Gender Focal Points with Ambassador Marriët Schuurman, Lieutenant Colonel Magdalena Dvorakova, IMS Gender Adviser; Major Stephanie Nicol, ACT GENAD, and Lieutenant Colonel Lars Berglund from the Nordic Centre for Gender in Military Operations. Photo by JWC PAO.

and targeting specifically the Russian speaking female population as protectors of traditional values or life and mobilizing them. Tactics used in information warfare, in StratCom, in hybrid warfare scenarios are very gendered, so not seeing that or not analysing what exactly is going on, may cause us to miss a point which could be critical for our response. And for our defence. Similarly, when it comes to countering violent extremism, if we don't understand how gender is used to target women, to recruit women, to use women, particularly slavery as a sort of financing of warfare; if we don't apply a gender lens and miss all those points and, therefore, are not responding, gender becomes an afterthought. The thing here is that if we include a more gender-disaggregated risk analysis, we will see those points and will take action from the very start rather than after harm is done. So, any scenario applying a gender lens provides more insights and extra answers that we can use to promote a more comprehensive response to those threats.

What has had the biggest influence on you?

— I am privileged to be a diplomat and to travel and live in many different cultures and countries. My main lesson from all those experiences is, I believe, that it is very gratifying to always be accepted and absorbed in a new country and a new environment. You learn a lot from that. There is not one way only of doing things the right way. There are many ways of looking at things and dealing with things, so I learned a lot. But I also learned that, in essence, there is more that unites us than that divides us: working in development, understanding what poverty is and what lack of opportunity means, for instance. Fundamentally, people want the same thing. They want safety; they want a roof over their head. They want quality schooling and access to health care for their children, so that the children don't die from diarrhoea and other avoidable causes of death. However, there are many seats round the table and many different perspectives, so you learn to see and understand someone else's perspective because you have been there, and I think that helps a lot also in my current job. As I said, again, when it comes to gender and gender equality, we have actually a lot in common, so we can really build bridges. I see one of those bridges, which would be platforms for exchanging those common solutions, shared concerns and best practices. For me, in my current position, that's one of the most gratifying things to do. We like to think that we are all very different, but in the end we have a lot in common. We would find better solutions if we cooperate better, listen more attentively and try to learn from experiences that are different from our own, but equally valid and valuable.

Is there anything you would like to add?

— It's very gratifying to be here at the JWC. This is NATO's key training facility, and training experts here know that embedding a gender perspective at the strategic level is not a question of whether they like to do it. It's not optional. They know it should be done. The question is simply *how*: how to find the best possible way that would be meaningful and helpful for their day-to-day jobs today: how to make gender work for day-to-day tasks and to do the right thing right. I am very happy to be here, to share those ideas and NATO's record of implementing UNSCR 1325 and the NATO/EAPC+ Action Plan. I have found a very open-minded leadership and a very engaged staff who provide training on a very wide spectrum and understand the importance of gender in modern warfare, in peace but also in conflict countries.