

Sweden's women conscripts get free feminine hygiene products

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At the military barracks in Sweden's southern town of Karlskrona, as in those across the country, every bathroom is equipped with dispensers for tampons and sanitary pads supplied to women conscripts for free.

The initiative is aimed at improving gender equality in the military and combating what is often called period poverty, when [low-income women](#) and girls struggle to pay for feminine hygiene products.

"We want to make it possible for women conscripts to have all the supplies they need at their disposal," Per Oster, a gender equality adviser for the Swedish Armed Forces, told AFP.

Along with Norway and Israel, Sweden is one of the few Western countries to have mandatory military service for both men and women, which it introduced in 2018.

Sweden is the first country to offer free menstrual products to its conscripts.

"Before, the only place women could get ahold of feminine hygiene products in the military was when they were admitted to the infirmary," Oster recalled.

"That's crazy!"

Introduced in 2020, the move illustrates the Swedish military's efforts to ensure gender equality.

Maria Juvel, a conscript who is three months into her military service, said it has succeeded.

"I feel no difference compared to what the guys feel, I think," she told AFP of her experience so far.

"It's exactly the same for everyone, it's egalitarian," she said. "Nobody looks down on you and it's not harder because you're a woman."

'We think differently'

According to her company commander Carl Gustav Gonzalez, mentalities have changed a great deal since the 1990s, when women were first allowed to do military service on an equal footing with men.

"When I did my military service there were around 800 of us and I can pretty much count the number of girls on one hand," the 45-year-old said.

"We didn't think of (feminine hygiene products) at the time," he said.

"That was a while ago, thankfully we're better now and we think differently."

In the country of 10.5 million people, [military service](#) lasts between six and 15 months.

In 2022, a total of 5,475 youths were called up, an increase of 46 percent from four years ago.

In Karlskrona, the barracks are mixed gender. Among the 165 conscripts this year, two out of five are [women](#), a higher ratio than the national average of 24 percent.

In the bathrooms, the men are not surprised to see sanitary napkin and tampon dispensers next to the toilet paper.

"It's very good," said one male conscript who refused to give his name, surprised that the dispensers would even elicit any interest.

Nationwide, the military bought roughly 740,000 menstrual products in 2022.

It plans to extend the measure to all military staff in the future.

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