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Conforming One's Conduct to Unwritten Rules

Experiences of Female Military Personnel in a Male-Dominated Organization

By Frida Linehagen

The Armed Forces are one of Sweden's largest government organizations, and one of the most gender-segregated and male-dominated among them. Soldiers, sailors, airmen and their leaders and commanders have long been men only. Though women could join patriotic volunteer military organizations as early as the 1900's, it was not until 1980 that they were first allowed to enter the military as volunteers – but in specific positions only. Such restrictions were removed in 1989, however, and there have been no formal limitations since then on the roles and units for which women can apply in any of the armed services.¹

Today, 37 years after the first Swedish females saw professional military service, the number of servicewomen amounts to 8.4% of the active-duty force. While that proportion has long remained stable, the Armed Forces have now decided to increase it – though they admit to experiencing difficulties in recruiting and retaining women. In line with current legislation, the Swedish military is required to treat all persons equally, and is actively engaged in on-going developmental work to ensure that their treatment is premised on merit, competence and proficiency,² irrespective of gender. This should be achieved more easily in the military than elsewhere since it is marked by a unique culture, team spirit and a manner of dress intended to generate solidarity and to create trust among the women and men who serve in it and, in the most profound meaning of the phrase, are prepared to sacrifice their lives if necessary.³

From time immemorial, to defend the country against armed attack at the possible cost of one's own life was a man's role, and only in the most recent decades have women taken part in that effort. Despite developmental work and policy programmes to the contrary, the Swedish Armed Forces have not succeeded in integrating women into the organization to any particularly large extent.⁴ This makes it especially interesting to probe what it means and feels like to be a woman in today's military.

The purpose of this study is to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of female military personnel in a traditionally male-dominated organization.

¹ Sundevall, 2011.

² Försvarsmakten, 2015, p.2.

³ Coser, 1974 ; Ydén, 2008.

⁴ Linehagen, 2016.

Women and Men in Military Contexts

This research takes as its starting point the military profession's historically male-dominated format and its age-old inclination to emphasize and reinforce masculine norms,⁵ thereby affecting the chances that a woman in the military has of being able to self-identify as a military professional.

Alvinus and colleagues⁶ studied favourable and unfavourable aspects of the recruitment of women to command positions in the Armed Forces and concluded that women are portrayed as different from men and as deviant from the male standard in a way that affects their career paths negatively. For both individual and organizational reasons, women's are made invisible in their careers, or visible only when, for example, a breach of duty that has occurred is pointed out. Lindgren⁷ studied the division of labour between the sexes and showed that male homosociality is common, and means that there is an alliance between the men, a kind of male community that excludes women. Lindgren also found various forms of heterosociality which arise when women primarily relate to, support and seek support from men. Older studies (such as Lindgren, 1985) also show that a woman is something other than a colleague or a comrade in her unit: she is a person who belongs to the socially disqualified sex and must subordinate herself to the men in order to be supported in the task at hand (*ibid.*).

The results of Swedish research studies conducted in diverse contexts over a thirty-year span remain stubbornly identical: in any number of organizations females are seen as deviant from the norm set by men, which impacts the possibilities for women to make a career.⁸ Despite the fact that Sweden is ranked as one of the world's ten most equal countries,⁹ the conclusion to be drawn is that women's experience in their work lives is similar to that of other women's experiences elsewhere in the Western world.

In her study of female Israeli soldiers and their identity formation in the military's male environment, Orna Sasson-Levy¹⁰ showed how they shape their military roles in relation to the prevailing masculine norm. A study of US cadets by Boldry and colleagues (2001) showed that both male and female cadets value women's military suitability lower than that of men, which the authors maintain is a consequence of general gender stereotypes. Structural explanations are part of this, the authors say, as such stereotypes are maintained by a system in which women are in the minority both in military training and in the organization as a whole, and they are excluded from active combat, the most highly valued task within the military. Alvinus and colleagues studied male elite soldiers within the Swedish Armed Forces and showed that a specific type of masculinity is functional within the context studied. The masculinity norm among elite soldiers governs what the

⁵ Boldry *et al.*, 2001; Sasson-Levy, 2003 ; Alvinus *et al.*, 2015.

⁶ Alvinus *et al.*, 2016.

⁷ Lindgren, 1996.

⁸ Alvinus *et al.*, 2016, *op.cit.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Sasson-Levy, 2003.

men are and are not allowed to feel, and creates community, focus and a unique culture. To be an elite soldier, with all the manliness that this implies, is experienced as being superior to all others within the organization.¹¹

Ivarsson¹² studied women's career paths towards command positions and came to the conclusion that the preeminent predictor of advancement in organizations is a learned "masculine" personality profile, regardless of sex. Other researchers¹³ showed that the male norm is associated with the ability to take decisive action leading to success. Women become the enemy within their own organization, says Kovitz (2001), who (citing a number of examples from the Canadian Armed Forces) pointed to the organizational changes which have been brought in order to make women an accepted part of the military. What makes women's entry into the Armed Forces so threatening is that there are orders to integrate women on the same terms as men even in combat positions, which the author says challenges and disturbs not only men but also the military's goals and methods. In order to remedy this, Kovitz thinks that the question of the military's masculinity must be discussed in light of a better understanding of what women represent in that connection. The studies reveal how women within different organizations continually strive to maintain masculine norms in their professional activities in order to be seen as effective performers. Research shows that the organization's structure and its members interact and steer both women and men in a certain direction if they are to achieve their career goals. A direction that tends to be described as masculine.¹⁴

Shields¹⁵ showed a further unfavourable factor associated with women's minority status. Responsibilities that pertain to life roles other than those of service itself, as a wife and mother, make it more difficult for the women. When organizational adversities become too obvious, studies from several countries and organizations¹⁶ suggest that it is especially important for women to have informal support from their husbands or partners. Ivarsson (2001) explains the phenomenon by family life changes that often become especially significant when it is the woman who advances at work. Studies show that their partners/husbands and families both complicate and facilitate the situation for women advancing in male-dominated workplaces.

Strategies for Success

However, research has also shown that women who have chosen to work in organizations where they are in the minority are comfortable with their job and in the organization. Iskra¹⁷, who studied women in the US military elite and their strategies for achieving success, concluded that they did not permit themselves to doubt their capacity on

¹¹ Alvinus *et al.*, 2015.

¹² Ivarsson, 2001.

¹³ Kovitz, 2001 ; Cettner, 2008.

¹⁴ ; Kovitz, 2001 ; Boldry *et al.*, 2001 ; Sasson-Levy 2003 ; Cettner, 2008.

¹⁵ Shields, 1985.

¹⁶ Ivarsson 2001 ; Iskra, 2007 ; Löfgren Lundqvist, 2014.

¹⁷ Iskra, 2007.

account of their gender, and utilized the possibilities they encountered to advance in their careers. In addition, they felt loyalty and attachment to their workplaces. The study also found that for career success, a system in which mentors were available on demand for personal support and professional guidance was of decisive import. Likewise, in the Swedish Armed Forces, support from commanding officers and structured career planning help women in their careers.¹⁸ When it comes to women's attitudes towards male norms, Lindgren (1985) also noted that some servicewomen identify themselves as one of the men and see no problems with being in a minority in the workplace – a strategy that tends to distance them from other women. Others, however, choose to act the way women are expected to behave, so as to avoid being seen as a threat to their surroundings. By acting as a mother or playing on her femininity, a female is better accepted as she is perceived as fundamentally “other” and no threat to the men's masculinity. Sasson-Levy¹⁹ describes how female soldiers shape their roles in relation to the prevalent masculine norm by imitating fighting soldiers, thus distancing themselves from traditional femininity as well as from the ridicule of sexual harassment. Bergman²⁰ showed that those females who choose to act and appear as “boy-girls” rapidly become an unproblematic, self-evident part of the community. Finally, Linehagen²¹ concluded in her study of female officers that finding a role with which they feel pleased is important. Linehagen further states that this is not simply the role of an outsider, but of an *established* outsider, from which women can derive advantages and occupy a clear place in the established male order.

The Military Profession

What characterizes a classic profession is its long training, strong monopoly on competence and legitimacy. It is not uncommon for the established professions to be awarded high income, status and prestige.²² The military profession differs from many others in that it is practised in a collective. A large part of both schooling and practical training takes place in a group, which means that the individual finds expression in the collective.²³ Ydén²⁴ writes that classic writers on the military profession, Huntington, Janowitz and Abrahamsson, agree that the central components in the military profession are expertise, ethics and corporateness, i.e. solidarity and team spirit. The Swedish Armed Forces say that the military profession is unique in its jurisdiction as ultimately in charge of the nation's security when faced with armed conflict. Ringarp²⁵ distinguishes between outer and inner professional traits, where the outer traits refer, among other things, to abstract knowledge and self-control while inner characteristics involve norms and issues concerning common ethical questions, for example, professional identity. The present

¹⁸ Löfgren Lundqvist, 2014 ; Alvinus *et al.*, 2016.

¹⁹ Sasson-Levy, 2003.

²⁰ Bergman, 2009.

²¹ Linehagen, 2016.

²² Brante, 2015.

²³ Brehmer & Thunholm, 2011.

²⁴ Ydén, 2008.

²⁵ Ringarp, 2011.

study focuses on the inner profession, and specifically on a minority group's experiences with reference to what it means to be a professional in the military. The martial profession's unique method of collective problem solving clearly appears in the narratives of the interviewed persons.

Method

The study's purpose is to obtain accounts of personal experiences and for that purpose, in line with Creswell's²⁶ contention that qualitative studies are especially useful for obtaining a richly detailed understanding of a subject and for deriving patterns from the collected empirical data, it appeared that personal interviews would be the most appropriate method.²⁷ The focus in this research is on describing and interpreting answers from the interviews that were carried out with nine female military persons at various levels within the Armed Forces. In order to study the experiences of a minority in a male-dominated organization, the main themes used were the military profession as well as status, gender, and support.

Data Collection

The interviews were conducted in a military service room or alternatively in a conference room at the workplace. The participant herself was given the choice of the place that suited her best and where she felt most comfortable. To open up the dialogue the interview began with an informal conversation so as to encourage the interviewee to speak freely. The interviews were semi-structured, i.e. followed an interview guide. The participants described their experiences and thoughts about their work in the Armed Forces, and were not interrupted if they touched upon other questions also present in the interview guide. During the interviews, many questions were asked of a type which subsequently arose out of the interviewed person's narratives of her experiences. Follow-up questions such as "What more can you describe, what do you mean, will you explain, have I understood you correctly?" were utilized in order to obtain and mirror a deeper reflection of the participants' experiences.

The interviews lasted between 35 and 59 minutes, and were recorded after consent from the participant. They were thereafter carefully transcribed and written out.

Selection of Participants

A strategic selection was performed to secure the broadest possible range of interviewee backgrounds. The respondents' rank ranged from private to general, with more women of lower than of higher ranking. Age was not a specific factor in the study, but as it can be assumed to correlate with rank, it was also diverse. Where two participants were of the same rank, the selection ensured that they held different seniority in rank. Since there are few women within their respective posting locations, it was decided, in the interests of anonymity, that the study would not provide any precise indication as to rank.

²⁶ Creswell, 2014.

²⁷ Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2015.

Accordingly, the study’s respondents had between 3 and 30 years of service in the Armed Forces, with an average of 15 years. Four had university education of between two and six years, of which one was in the administration of the Swedish Defence University. The two women with the highest rank had studied three to four years in the service, where they had partly received higher education credits for their studies. One of them had a five-year academic degree when she first joined up.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded on the basis of a qualitative manifest content analysis, originally derived from Graneheim and Lundman (2004), though it was somewhat modified subsequently in order to suit the study’s purpose. Qualitative content analysis was used in order to describe the similarities and dissimilarities, that is, to find variations that would then help establish categories. In order to achieve this, after the interviews had been transcribed, the material had to be read several times, both superficially and more deeply in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of its content.²⁸ To make it possible to interpret the text, knowledge of the interview context was required, such as the female military person’s posting and job environment. Three orientations were thereafter created. Significant units – sentences related to one another²⁹ in text excerpts from the transcribed material – were taken out and placed in two columns, one for the purpose and one for the questions. In that way it was ensured that adequate parts were brought into the continued material analysis. Thereafter, the significant units were moved into a table in order to facilitate treatment. The next step in the process was to read through and sort all the significant units into various meaning areas, which formed subcategories ultimately gathered into four categories (Table 1). The categories summarize the core of the significant units. Since the text deals with human experiences there is a risk that the analyzed text will spread itself into more categories, but so far as possible this has been avoided.³⁰

Table 1: Example Drawn from the Study’s Data Analysis

Significant Unit	Subcategory	Category
I place value on being equally pleasant to everyone, regardless of whether I am speaking to a private or a major. I think that you must do that. But at the same time I notice that it is not so common, unfortunately.	Personal (leadership) style	Adapting to the professional norms
Of course, it is important for me to be a woman. But for the purpose at hand, not to be feminine !	Distance taken from the label “female military person”	Creation of a professional identity
It is so sad that one is not invited in the same way during leisure time. On the job, we are very close friends, but off duty I am no longer one of the gang.	Men’s relationship to women	Conforming one’s conduct to the rules of the game

²⁸ Essaiasson, 2012.

²⁹ Graneheim & Lundman, 2004.

³⁰ Bryman, 2001.

Ethical Considerations

Pursuant to the Swedish Research Council's ethical guidelines on research practice in the humanities and social science, the study respondents participated on a voluntary basis and were informed about the project and its purpose. The participants were also informed about their role in the investigation, and had the option of terminating their participation at any time during the whole process. In order to protect them, various measures were taken, such as using several interviewed persons within the same posting location area and not writing down their military rank or organizational affiliation. Such measures ensured that answers provided were kept (and will remain) confidential and anonymous. Information on those taking part was not (and will not be) utilized for any purpose other than this study, and the interview material obtained may only be used for research purposes. The interviewed persons, the Armed Forces, and the Swedish Defence University were provided with an opportunity to have copies of the study upon completion.

Results

This section presents the empirical data collected through the interviews. The findings are organized into four categories which give expression to the different strategies which appeared in the study : *Adaptation to the profession's norms*, *Creation of a professional identity*, *Conforming one's conduct to the rules of the game*, and *Effort to be a legitimate woman*. Categories and subcategories are shown in Table 2. The results are illustrated and backed up by interview quotes numbered 1 to 9, referring to respondents in no particular order.

Adaptation to the Profession's Norms

The Profession's Requirements

Most of the women said that it is very important to have great social competence in order to be able to serve as a military person. To be a good leader and be comfortable in the training role other skills are of great import. Part of the job of a military professional is to be able to make rapid and sometimes uncomfortable decisions, dare take responsibility and have a large dose of civil courage. It is also important to have a good physical constitution as well as an analytic attitude and theoretical inclinations.

I have the capacity to come into a new situation and be able to grasp my role. Thus "okay, I see that you are doing this", but can also keep my own eye glasses on for a while in order to identify "here we need to change and do a little more of this and that". [3]

It is also required of a military leader to have a strong will and be able to work hard, change the tempo quickly and to have the capacity to "see" every individual. A typical military person inspires both confidence and respect, takes responsibility, has high moral standards and is good at collaborating. The women in the study ascribe these criteria to themselves, with particular focus on their social competence, decisiveness, being structured and accustomed to delivering.

I am open and I listen, I place the responsibility on the individual. I often ask how people feel, take time to listen and ask how it feels. [8]

Personal (Leadership) Style

For all of the study's women, rather than be clothed in a role while on duty it is important to be the same person as in private life. Of course, differences exist between private and professional life : in the former, women can be late whereas the profession requires punctuality and that routines be followed. The narratives show that the study respondents are social and inviting with colleagues and subordinates, and find it easy to bring them into their personal spheres. Such traits are important for those who rely a lot on the spoken word and must make others feel comfortable. The women whose function is to lead consciously listen and are interested in other people :

Interaction is Alpha and Omega, absolutely, it is utterly important ! For me it is also important to know about the daily life of personnel since I am of course their spokesperson. (...) All it takes is to be present at coffee breaks where there are many people, since there are always people who want to ask questions and wonder about things. [1]

Some point out the importance of being equally pleasant and professional to everyone, regardless of rank, but find that not everyone in the organization is on the same page. From the narratives, it appears that the women must also take into account certain expectations in the discharge of their professional roles, notably that they ought to be strict and not disclose too much of themselves. The younger ones feel insecure and try to conduct themselves in strict conformity with such expectations while the older ones have consciously chosen to blend them into their leadership style and feel secure with that.

Most people's view is probably that one must distinguish between the person one is at work and the person one is in private life. It is equally important not to disclose so much of oneself in any way. For me this is so difficult, because I really love people and want everyone to feel at home. But I accept that this is bad, especially if one is in a command position. [9]

"My" Place in the Organization

It also clearly appears that the women find positions such as company commander, ship captain, or pilot most attractive. Some have no idea, but assume that they will move at some point to some kind of command responsibility. Three of the women were open about wanting to advance in the organization : one of them said she would follow the career path staked out by the organization ; the second, while wishing to find some way of her own, intended to remain within the limits of the pattern ; the third woman hoped to be able to work her way up on the basis of her civilian academic degree. The higher-ranking women see clear career paths with no major obstacles ahead. The rest of the women see greater career difficulties, mostly because they do not follow the set pattern and at present have positions that are narrow in scope :

If I want to get a better salary I can perhaps apply to be assigned to some other unit (...) but otherwise the possibilities for command are to a large extent, well, they are non-existent. [8]

The feeling that they are doing an important job and are needed in the organization is often on their minds. It is often more important than rising in rank. Rank is not attractive in itself, but because it opens up more interesting tasks. It appears from the descriptions that the women want to go further up in the organization but that they do not anticipate any support from their commanding officers since they are needed where they serve now. It is apparent that certain positions and posting locations have lower status than others. To serve on a staff is not as desirable as to serve in a unit of the line. For some of the women in the study that does not matter.

Of course, I can perhaps imagine studying in order to get a higher rank, but I have no desire to study now. There is nothing I am striving for now since I like to work and I am happy where I am now. [6]

Creating a Professional Identity

Distancing Oneself from the “Female Military Person” Label

All female service members in the study are in the minority at their workplaces and say that it is important for them to be women, but not to be feminine. They are also wary of engaging with someone just because she is also a woman. They insist that just because they are of the same sex does not mean that females will be friends, as friendships are influenced by a variety of factors beside gender. For the majority of the women it is vital *not* to be seen as a female military person but rather as a military person just like all others.

...yes, the best of course is that they even forget that one is a woman. [7]

The women describe themselves as always feeling very comfortable in their jobs as long as they are regarded as part of the community, and not as a woman among men but as a person among people. Only a few situations were mentioned where it was particularly clear that the women are women, as in going to the toilet in the woods or in a small boat at sea. The respondents said they like to see order in the workplace, though they insisted that, contrary to male suspicions, attention paid to order is not a female's *idée fixe* but is more a matter of personality. While many were careful not to generalize about males and females, the narratives emphasized that some differences are apparent between them in the military, and examples were given in which men were more task-oriented while women were more relationship-oriented.

I am probably quite relationship-oriented, if this is now a female characteristic ?
But I also have no problem at all with sweating and getting dirty. [2]

Women's Relationship with Men

Half of the women stated that they became active-duty professionals in the military precisely because it is male-dominated. Some had previously worked in female-dominated professions and wanted to have a change, while others saw it as an interesting challenge, or alternatively that it is less complicated to work with men. Yet, the narratives suggested

that they also see servicewomen as needing to struggle more than men, and not uncommonly to over-perform, in order to be accepted.

As a woman, one is always in the minority and becomes visible in the summer and needs to perform a little better in order to be accepted or chosen. And one is perhaps not compared on the same scale. [4]

The women have soon learned to assimilate the jargon used by male soldiers in their unit, to avoid being too sensitive, and dare speak out notwithstanding the hierarchies. The interviewees did not report any problem with this themselves, but noted that it had evolved with time. One who happened to be the only woman in her outfit said that she adopted something of a mother role, a stance that was deemed acceptable and which she feels comfortable with:

...as I am the only woman among thirty guys. Of course, they don't think about me sitting there, which I think is really cool since I hear everything. But it isn't as though I just sit there, mostly I sit and laugh, sometime at them, sometimes with them also, that's just how it is. [5]

It is important for women to be able to solve problems that arise in addressing group tasks, and somehow make their mark. Some succeed better than others. One mentioned that it matters when she manages to have the men around her express an idea in her presence. Another came to doubt her own capacity after the men judged she was not overly interested in the technological side of her job.

Driving Force and Career

The study's respondents, regardless of rank, reported that their career paths were hardly straight ones. Some felt that they had to struggle extra hard in order to obtain a specific position, due to specific selection criteria, or more generally because of unclear orders. It is of great import to speak to the right people and to push the matter forcefully.

There was no easy way of getting here, if I may say so. In part, there was very physically tough basic training, but then also quite a lot of uncertainty after I completed it. There was a vacant position, which I applied for but didn't get. I did not have everything which was required for it, but nearly so. They chose to prefer not to hire anyone for it and of course, that didn't feel so good. In the end, a high-ranking commander saw me and decided, outside of the framework, that I could start working in that unit. [4]

One woman had even threatened to resign in order to secure the right place, and though she did not feel good about it, she felt it was necessary in the circumstances. Most feel their career trajectory is shrouded in uncertainty, sometimes because they occupy a special position which does not follow the usual pattern. Some of the women were worried about getting stuck and being forced to change their professional paths entirely, while others unaffected by such fears imagine that there will be a solution when the matter arises. Whereas women of higher rank and those with academic degrees feel they can count on support from their commanding officers, the others have precisely the opposite feeling.

The former expressed satisfaction with the fact that higher rank means that you only remain in each position a few years before you are pushed upwards.

The participants put value on performing adequately on the job and enjoyed it when that was the case. The women with academic degrees acquired either within or outside of the Armed Forces felt that their academic background helped them do a good job.

I had the chance to go on an exercise where our battle readiness was to be tested and I was tossed into what felt like a five-day leave. It was a challenge to travel to England with a totally new group in order to test, in every possible way, just how capable we were. But it was also hugely rewarding and a huge source of personal development even if I sat and nearly cried due to performance anxiety the first week ! [6]

Some of the women pointed out that they felt a certain pride in being a prototype as a woman in the Armed Forces, while others were proud of having attained a certain level or position that they fought hard to reach. Some insisted that inherently interesting jobs are more important in their eyes than any ambition to make a career (even though one of them today holds one of the highest ranks in the Armed Forces).

Conforming One's Conduct to the Rules of the Game

Men as the Norm

Half the respondents said that they spontaneously think of a man when they picture a military person. They further described a person who is tough, in good physical shape and with short-clipped hair.

When I think about a military person I think about a man. He is hard and stiff and shows no feelings, doesn't complain. He takes the lead and does what he has been ordered to do. He must be hard and tough. [5]

One confessed that while she initially thought of a service member as a man, on further thought she could also picture a woman if only because she herself serves in the Armed Forces. Others, however, said that they do not associate a military person with either sex, but with a person who is in the right place. These women see more opportunities ahead and organize themselves to take advantage of them.

One participant described service members as pleasant, which surprised her at first but no longer, as the feeling has grown over the years. Another pointed out that she now noticed that there are men who are positively oriented towards the increased presence of women in the Armed Forces, which some years ago was not the case. Most women in the study pointed out the injustices they see in the Armed Forces, such as lower wages for females than for males for the same job, and a slower pace of promotion due to the fact that women often take parental leave for longer periods than the men.

Well, I myself did not decide I would have a womb ! It is truly extraordinary that just because it is I who will bear a child in my belly and then perhaps hold a different job for a while for reasons of safety, I may not be favoured. [2]

Female soldiers are sometimes suddenly reminded that they are in the minority, such as when during training it is decided that urination under certain circumstances must be done into a bottle. No alternatives are offered. And it often takes a lot of extra courage for a female to put herself forward in the Armed Forces. One reported on a situation where she sought training for promotion purposes :

I stood there in front of him, militarily erect, and said that when I got the higher rank my goal was to be the commanding officer in one of the largest units. It took a great deal of courage for me to express myself in that way, something which I think men have an easier time with. [3]

Men as Asset

More than half of the women in the study acknowledged that they were where they are in the Armed Forces today because men at higher levels saw their potential and pushed them further up in the system.

I have not needed to prove a whole lot of things, not needed to write an essay, instead they quite simply saw potential and I think that is fantastic ! So I have just been boosted by the commanding officers I have had over time and I have been super pleased with that. It is they who have prompted me to continue and to keep doing what I do. [9]

Some have even been challenged by men to seek specific positions that they would never have dared apply for on their own. One woman reported that after periods of opposition she was unexpectedly called upon to assume an attractive command position, which she felt as a huge turning point.

So suddenly one day during my parental leave I got a phone call from the personnel chief who offered me a position as commanding officer of a unit. And I just felt “Wow, finally ! This is how it’s supposed to function !” So I put the little one in pre-school early and went back to the job. [3]

Men as Threat

The respondents also mentioned situations where some men are more or less openly negative towards women in the military. You need to be on your guard because there are always those who have something against you, such as when you get an attractive job *even though* you are a woman.

“Yes,... you obviously have to keep an eye out for where the knives are sticking out so that you can steer clear of them, so to speak. [8]

In order to deal with situations like these the women found some strategies useful, such as to play along with hostile men, then avoid them and instead focus on those who are friendlier.

You, of course, notice signs of that sort in certain people (...) who also express themselves in some way, but then you just dump them. “I know who you are” and so you can then navigate around them. [3]

Men's Relationship with Women

The narratives also mentioned that some men judged the women based on how feminine they are. One woman heard that she was perceived as manly when she in reality followed the pattern which military personnel are supposed to and abided by the rules. Another got feedback recently that she ought to shout and speak more militarily and point more with her whole hand, even in front of a small group of people. Sometimes a woman get comments on their appearance, in one case for instance that her legs are white when she is wearing a skirt.

As when after a while a woman came to give us a lecture, some men said afterwards... "Yes, she was not particularly feminine". And then I felt that "no, she was awful, she was a military person". [7]

Another woman reported that she is ambitious and wants to help other people but that the men at her posting location then see her as "stressed". Female soldiers are often asked to provide a feminine view of a matter, but cannot always give one since they do not exactly know what a feminine view is. Sometimes, women feel like outsiders, as when they are not invited to participate in a sauna evening planned after work, simply because they were forgotten. It feels unpleasant to be so close to one another on the job, yet not be invited to participate in the same way after service hours since it seems odd for a married man to socialize with a woman. Females are questioned in their roles as commanders more often than men are, the participants said. For example, they may hear men talking deprecatingly about a particular woman in a commanding officer position.

A lot of what I only hear behind the scenes is "yes, but soon she'll probably go home and have maternal leave. (...) Of course she has children at home, she may well go back home soon since her husband probably also has a job". [2]

Some described how certain older men hold an old-fashioned view of women in the Armed Forces. Older men also have a tendency to adopt a father role and take care of younger women in the workplace, which is experienced as less than pleasant. There are also problems with men assuming that a woman does not want to take training for advancement to higher rank since she has small children at home, or that as a young woman she does not want to serve with older men on a staff.

Yes, but that document which recently came out which said that more distance learning should be made available because it would favour women in their parenting. That drove me crazy ! It doesn't favour women in parenting, it favours parenting, period ! [1]

One woman said she thinks some of the men are afraid of female commanding officers as they don't know what to expect since there are so few female commanders in the organization. Some pointed out that they strongly disapprove when men talk about women as if it is a problem for a female to be in the minority, and at the same time say that it is fortunate that challenges for women come from the highest levels for then they can refer back to the commanding officer when discussion arises. The narratives described the

absence of feedback on the job as obvious since the women are not part of the back-slapping culture. This leads women to pep up one another more, but also to consider that if no one says that something is entirely wrong, then it is likely more right than wrong.

Striving to Be a Legitimate Woman

The Military Person and Society

Some of the participants' friends found it difficult to understand what they do at work, and even if most of them had warmer feelings towards the Armed Forces after their female friends donned a uniform, a lot of information has yet to be grasped:

Some of my civilian friends think that I am still doing compulsory military service. Even though that was nine years ago ! [6]

Many were of the opinion that the Armed Forces lack a real anchorage in Swedish society and consider that the institution could clearly be much better at describing what its budget is used for. At the same time, six of the study's nine participants said that they prefer not to talk about their jobs with their civilian friends. Some, especially if they live with another service member, confessed that they let go of service issues when they can, others that their friends for various reasons are not interested. One of the women averred that for her the military is a job, not a life. Another pointed out that if they talk about the military, it is important to maintain a positive picture, though not to lie about them, in order to avoid hardening civilian prejudice against the Armed Forces. Many reported that the public's image of a military person coincides with the stereotype of a determined, short-haired, muscular man and that they are often met with amazement from others when their career is revealed:

I serve as a professional officer in the Armed Forces.
What, really ?! You are terribly nice ! And a woman ! [2]

The narratives are unambiguous as to the respondents' pride in their participation in the Armed Forces, in doing something important for others, in being a power for good in the world, and protecting the country. The Armed Forces deserve higher status in the society, the women said, and one possible way would be to enhance the academic character of even larger parts of the training.

Women's Relationship to Women

In the study women's eyes, it is important for the Armed Forces to recruit more females to the profession and promote a more gender-equal organization, which will function better in many ways as a result. Positive special treatment is pointed out as an available method, but they are careful to point out that quotas are an entirely wrong way to go about it. The majority of participants, however, confessed that it was only in recent years that they began to think positively about affirmative action for women. They said that with the passage of years they found themselves more accepting than previously of making women and femininity more visible. Some mentioned that it has taken many years for them to reach the point where...

...they invest in [other] women, I think that is really good ! Before I had probably wondered whether it was just that they didn't want to, like, they were assumed to be against the men then and to be different. Now it is more "Yes, good !" [6]

At the same time, they are of course aware that many women within the organization have not come quite as far in their thinking about making women more visible. It is therefore especially important that direction and investment come from the highest level and that there should be a highly placed commanding officer to refer back to when condescending discussions arise among women in the organization. For some, the experience of serving in the Armed Forces has made femininity take centre stage as the urge to be elegant, wear makeup and nail polish, becomes more powerful after a week in a male uniform.

Now I sort of long to fix myself up ! Wear a dress and have red nail polish and mascara. I never did that before, because when I was a civilian I could do it every day, I can't do that now. [7]

The women in the study felt that they have closer contact on the job with other women than with men. Gender solidarity comes naturally to female soldiers because their numbers are low. They sometimes eat lunch together, have their own meetings both on and off duty, and try to support and encourage one another. Many need to be gently pushed in the right direction before they dare seek to advance in the system, and tend to think a little longer than men before they take that step. It would appear that what is involved is finding their place, which most do only after some years in the organization. Female solidarity, however, has its limits: a number among them think that some women play too much on their femininity or do really stupid things, which makes them want to keep their distance from these women.

The Scarcity of Female Commanding Officers

None of the study's women had a female commanding officer and only occasionally could one be found in their vicinity. Without exception, the respondents find little to say about women in command positions since they do not have any illustration at all to cite.

No but there really aren't any female examples at higher levels. This is really sick ! I had one woman in my vicinity once who was a commanding officer. She was so damned cruel ! But then you wonder, why isn't she serving on the CIC's (Commander in Chief) staff, for instance ? Because she was that good. But the women are not visible. I don't know why. [5]

In the participants' view, new methods are needed – they cite mentoring programmes and informal coaching as promising ways – in order to recruit more women to leading positions. Some doubt whether the military even has the willpower to do so. It is a matter of getting more women to dare apply for higher command positions.

In my darkest hours, I wonder whether the Armed Forces will ever promote more women to leading positions. It will take an awful lot of time. (...) They say that they want more female commanding officers but I don't think they are creating tools for developing more female commanding officers. [1]

The study's women pointed out the self-doubts that assail them, for example, after securing or failing to secure a particular position. If I did or did not get it, is it because I am a woman, or because I am blond, or because I have not followed a direct path? Am I the best qualified person, and do I have what it takes to succeed in it? A lot of energy is required to overcome such doubts. One cited the example of a woman who, having received a commanding officer position through the system's efforts to promote females, still asks herself if she was the right person and what consequences it may bring about for other women.

Equality at Home

A majority of the women lived with a man who is also a professional soldier, and whether or not they have children, many felt that managing dual-career couples is a conundrum. Since both spouses or partners are away from home much of the time at irregular intervals, long periods can pass before they are simultaneously off duty. It is important to share an ambition to make this work even before they have children, and the participants look to the women who have risen higher up in the hierarchy than they have themselves:

So much more is required of a woman than of a man to rise in rank here. For most women the heaviest load is the home and the whole society expects that the woman will do that. [9]

Those women who have children say that they occasionally get support from grandparents. Some divided their parental leave in several parts so as to manage the puzzle, while others have chosen to take parental leave for a longer period. The narratives make it clear that an equal couple relationship at home is a precondition for managing the service requirements of dual-career couples:

It is possible to manage two military careers if you have an equal couple, I'd say. (...) We have achieved this in the way we function, but I understand that for others we are entirely controversial, being an equal couple, which is extremely odd !! [3]

One woman thought that the military is a good employer since it dares to appoint the parents of small children as commanding officers; another says that the Armed Forces could do more to give military families better conditions and make it easier to reconcile parent and professional roles. One woman said that she has made it clear to her partner that she intends to advance in the system; another said that she is subordinating herself to her partner's ambitions since he is living his dream in his job and she is not.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study's overarching research problem was to probe what it means and feels like to be a female service member in today's Armed Forces in light of their male tradition and dominance. Its author also intended to examine female soldiers' job experience as well as what aspects of their service life affects their experiences most.

The analysis of the interviews shows that servicewomen's experiences can best be described as membership in a profession that is in many ways unique *and* beset today by individual and organizational paradoxes. On the one hand, while society makes strong demands for greater equality in gender-segregated professions, the military shows less than willing, or finds itself unable, to promote the kind of measures that would make it possible. On the other hand, in order to gain full membership and to advance in the organization, female soldiers have developed strategies to navigate one of Sweden's most male-dominated workplaces. Based on the interviews, these strategies revolve around the four themes already examined in the Results section, which will again provide the headings for the discussion of findings below.

The study suggests that after nearly forty years of female participation in the military profession, and despite tons of research on it as well as insistent societal pressures for enhanced gender equality, little progress has been made so far: the research still shows approximately the same results. What distinguishes this study's findings from many others is that the lower-ranking respondents more quickly identified themselves as women, and *prima facie* at any rate showed more willing to support other women. The women at higher levels are pioneers: while it has taken them a long time to reconcile themselves to being women, the greater freedom that comes with high rank has not passed unnoticed among younger servicewomen, which – when it comes to gender relations – may have an effect on those wishing to follow in their footsteps and reach there at a faster pace.

Adaptation to the Profession's Norms

Women need to adjust to the profession's prevailing conditions in order to have a place in the organization, and for that purpose they adopt different strategies. The military is described in the study as requiring a whole range of abilities, from both physical and analytical capacity to good leadership and learning skills, as well as a strong sense of responsibility. The descriptions are in line with what the Armed Forces say are the military profession's central characteristics: expertise, responsibility and a value system deriving from its ultimate functional justification – face and manage the State's armed conflict³¹. The empirical data show that the women in the study ascribe to themselves many of the traits that the profession requires, not least leadership skills. Regardless of whether the woman is a commanding officer or a private, a personal style of on-duty behaviour based on authenticity emerges, which makes it important to be the same person on the job and in private life. At the same time, they face certain expectations implying on their part reserve and discretion, which Shields³² explains as the effects of male organizational traditions that create pitfalls for and opposition to female leadership.

With the help of Bourdieu,³³ it is possible to understand the military profession's orthodoxy as a faith in the prevailing order, perceived as natural and especially difficult to question as it occupies centre stage in the military profession's long history and tradition.

³¹ Försvarsmakten, 2015c.

³² Shields, 1985.

³³ Bourdieu, 1977.

Conforming one's conduct to the norm is a strategy the women have developed by restraining their behaviour and acting more in the ways that are expected of them. To restrain one's conduct need not necessarily be a requirement of the profession, but it is more nearly something which the woman *believes* is a professional requirement, whereas in reality it is the military profession's orthodoxy in that regard.

Yet, whether real or imagined, the women studied were willing to wash away the norm imposing certain behaviours on them. It is more important for a woman to be "one of the gang" than it is to be a good service member. This can be explained by the military profession's unique character – most notably the fact that the collective plays a central role in both schooling and professional activity, and the individual is only allowed to have expression in or through the collective.³⁴ Other studies of male-dominated organizations confirm that a "masculine" way of conducting oneself is of the utmost importance in order to advance in the organization.³⁵ Yet, the older women in the study have now made an active choice to be personal in their leadership style and feel satisfied with that. The reason for this is that these older women have capital assets valued by the profession: to some extent maturity, but primarily military rank. This in turn constitutes a precondition for the women to be able to opt for a personal style notwithstanding the risks involved. The same women see a straight career path ahead of them without significant obstacles, as the history of success they have behind them has enabled them to accumulate symbolic capital – paradoxically based on orthodox conduct that has taken them to where they are today.

The empirical data show that for the women, to advance in the organization is less important than the feeling that the organization needs them and places them in a position to do a good job. This shows yet again that the collective weighs more heavily than the individual in the military profession.³⁶ At the same time, some women feel trapped in their current postings and believe they are not receiving enough support from the organization and their commanding officers to advance further in the system. While for the time being they are content with the useful role the organization has assigned them, the longer view is not as satisfactory.

Creation of a Professional Identify

One of the military profession's major requirements is to create for oneself a professional identity which is well suited both to the organization and to the individual. In order to have a place in it, it is important for a woman to distance herself from her femininity so as to be both a woman and a military person. Bourdieu³⁷ avers that high capital is seldom generated by being a woman in a male-dominated environment and that this provides an explanation for why female service members do best when others completely forget that they are women. In their efforts to defeminize themselves, it is essential not to cluster about with other women, whether what is involved is friendship or

³⁴ Brehmer & Thunholm, 2011.

³⁵ Cettner, 2008.

³⁶ Försvarsmakten, 2015c.

³⁷ Bourdieu, 1999.

purely professional collaboration. Sasson-Levy³⁸ offers similar results when Israeli female soldiers also strive to adhere to the masculine norm. So do other studies showing that distancing oneself from traditional femininity is a strategy developed in order to participate in the organization.³⁹

The participants, however, avoided generalizing about femininity and masculinity, and every time the subject of gender arose to interpret differences in behaviour they made a point of emphasizing that factors other than gender were involved. Bourdieu⁴⁰ notes that *habitus* constitutes a framework for how individuals think about and perceive their surroundings: therein probably lies the explanation for the fact that, in spite of their best efforts to avoid it, women in the study repeatedly came up against something or someone being described as feminine or masculine. In the military profession, femininity and masculinity are particularly visible as a result of its male-coded orthodoxy. At the same time, while the respondents did not want to focus on differences between women and men, they admitted that there *are* differences, which is in line with Lindgren's study.⁴¹ According to Bourdieu,⁴² key to this is the symbolic violence that men exert over women, which can also explain why a woman avoids being feminine as an attempt to avert the consequences of male dominance.

The empirical data further show that the women feel they are continuously being observed, which prompts them at all times to be careful to do more than is required so as to gain capital and acceptance. Yet they also find that this is not enough, that something more is required which they do not have, so that they feel misperceived in their efforts to accumulate capital.⁴³ Another strategy proceeds on the assumption that a woman needs to seek the men's support before she makes a proposal. By doing so, she secures a gain in capital, or avoids the risk of losing some instead. This is indeed what may happen if the men judge a woman adhering to the orthodoxy (of which they are themselves the norm setters), to be insufficiently interested in the technical aspects of her job role. In other words, armed with their high capital, the men wield symbolic power as a means of control over the woman with lower capital. Over time, such a double bind makes it impossible for her to conduct herself successfully in conformity with the orthodoxy.

The higher-ranking women and those with academic degrees without exception feel greater confidence in both the organizational system and their commanding officers. This can be explained by their higher symbolic capital. In particular, the academic capital associated with high rank gives a woman more assurance and a certain perceived superiority over others in the organization who do not have that background, which given the increasingly academic character of officer training, is valued by the organization more than was previously the case. Social capital, i.e. membership in a broad social network and

³⁸ Sasson-Levy, 2003.

³⁹ Löfgren Lundqvist, 2014 ; Lindgren, 1985.

⁴⁰ Bourdieu, 1990.

⁴¹ Lindgren, 1985.

⁴² Bourdieu, 1999.

⁴³ Denissen (2010) reports similar findings in the building trades.

the opportunities it provides of talking to the right people, appears especially important when it comes to advancement in an organization where the collective is more important than the individual and contributions to the group's or the organization's success is the main measure of merit. This the study's servicewomen clearly grasped as they placed great weight on performance on the job in order to be fully associated with collective achievements, which according to Brehmer and Thunholm (2001) constitutes a large part of the military profession's unique character.

Conforming One's Conduct to the Rules of the Game

While every individual is required to conform to the rules of the game in order to have a place in the organization, the problem for female soldiers is that the rules of the game are often unclear. It took a long time for some participants to understand how to comply with them. The study confirms that the orthodoxy within the military profession is extremely male-coded and that it may therefore be more difficult for women to adjust their conduct to it. Biological differences between men and women appear in the respondents' answers in connection with pregnancy and the career consequences it entails for females in military profession. Shields⁴⁴ contends that the differences associated with life roles that differ from professional roles make it more difficult for women in a male organization. Since the Armed Forces have thus far proved unable to create the right conditions for women to serve on equal terms, such as seeing to it that a pregnant woman is assigned to a physically safer position during all or part of her pregnancy, that woman has to put her career ambitions on hold and falls behind. She either momentarily drops out or is placed in a position which does not provide increased symbolic capital. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence helps us understand the lack of recognition of women's needs which becomes especially apparent where, as in the military profession, a male code pervades all aspects of life in the organization.⁴⁵

More examples of symbolic violence are supplied in the study, such as when the women are reminded that they are in the minority and men call the tune, whether what is involved is practical solutions in everyday life (rules on longer consecutive service time after training) or field conditions (urination in bottles), or again advancement in the system. Double binds abound, as when a woman becomes pregnant and yet is expected to behave as usual – like a man. Such cases are utterly unsolvable for women: no matter what they do, they will go wrong. Female soldiers are often judged on the basis of how feminine they are or are not. If a woman is feminine, she will quickly learn that this does not befit a military professional, but when she adapts to the orthodox structure, others will remind her that it is unacceptably male.⁴⁶ One possible strategy is to stifle their femininity and distance themselves from colleagues who go the other route. Yet, the empirical data show that it does not work. Male dominance cannot be exercised unless it is acknowledged by

⁴⁴ Shields, 1985.

⁴⁵ Bourdieu, 1999.

⁴⁶ Similar results appear in Bergman (2009) who studied female workers in the steel industry in the 1970s.

both women and men. Now, as Bourdieu contends,⁴⁷ no one can get rid of an incorporated habitus, which creates continuous dilemmas for females.

The study shows that the men in the organization can also be seen as an asset. Several examples of men supporting women in the system were given, even when, or perhaps precisely because, the women themselves doubted. Earlier studies on the military confirm that support from commanding officers and a structured career plan help women in their careers.⁴⁸ The women are grateful when it is the case, as they see it as a sign that can find a place in the organization after all. At the same time, the men constitute in many ways a threat, which gives rise to strategies that the women develop in order to circumvent it and avoid the sting of symbolic violence.

Females in command roles are questioned more often than men in similar positions. One possible reason for this, they suspect, is that where the commanding officer is a woman, uncertainty is created in both performance and expectations, which can find expression in doubt and deprecating comments. Even though a woman has succeeded in accumulating enough capital to become a commanding officer, she finds that male dominance is even stronger at the commanding officer level. Kovitz (2001) notes that the women in some way become enemies in their own organization because females in such roles constitute a threat for the male structure.

It is sometimes particularly obvious to women that being in the minority is not without consequences. This is apparent in how some of the men try to adopt a father image, above all for younger women, or when men openly speak about the problem of being a woman in a male-dominated organization. But while these well-intentioned men are trying to support them, the women themselves do not want to be seen as women among men and are in two minds about it. The same happens when efforts to integrate women come from organizational sources, as when the idea surfaces that more distance learning in training for advancement in rank would benefit those among them with childcare problems. An attempt at that level, far from favouring women, undermines their status since the special treatment they receive becomes more visible as deviations from the norm, which lowers their capital.

Further, women are not part of the men's "backslapping culture", which reflects what Lindgren (1990) calls their homosociality, and a general male habitus. One obvious strategy women adopt to counter the feeling they are excluded is to strengthen connections and solidarity with other women. While not all the women in the study availed themselves of this strategy, those who did were careful to point out that it has nothing to do with their gender status but rather that their situation requires it.

Striving to Be a Legitimate Woman

As a woman and service member, it is not enough to conform one's conduct to the rules of the game as there are other rules applying to women only, which make it

⁴⁷ Bourdieu, 1990.

⁴⁸ Alvinus *et al.*, 2016 ; Löfgren Lundqvist, 2014.

especially necessary to be a legitimate woman. One of the ideas that surfaced in the study was that the Armed Forces seem to lack anchorage in society, and female soldiers could in part remedy this through their family and friendly connections. However, most of the women interviewed made the conscious choice not to talk much about career and job matters during their leisure time. For some this is because they live together with another service member; for others it is important to distinguish between on- and off-duty time. Interestingly, the participants often made a point of being more feminine when off duty, especially if their femininity was consciously stifled during service hours in order to accumulate valuable symbolic capital.

The organization's investment in women is met favourably by other service-women. Several of them said that they had finally found acceptance, and experienced it as okay to support other women. From private to general, the participants in the study mentioned that they were prepared to make both women and femininity more visible today than some years ago, which may be a sign that something is in the process of changing. Indeed, whereas Lindgren had shown in 1985 that some of the women identified themselves as men and actively distanced themselves from other women, over thirty years later the present study *at first glance* seems to show the opposite. Yet, the empirical data suggest otherwise as many participants do consciously avoid displays of femininity. In line with Lindgren's (1990) theory of "heterosociality", while no one exactly knows what the essence of masculinity or femininity is, everybody is nonetheless aware of differences between men and women, and that the burden in the military is on women to adjust to a men's world. "Sisterhood" as a means to generate solidarity among women and counter the effects of their minority status has its own pitfalls, as it threatens to create a feminine orthodoxy in the form of further unwritten rules, thus adding to the difficulty of being a woman *and* a soldier. It would be an extreme paradox if women, in order to be legitimate within the organization, had to comply simultaneously with divergent sets of rules and straddle the gap between them.

Key to much of the above is the influence of women's habitus and their acknowledgement of male dominance. One example is provided by the case of the female commanding officer who, having expressed her appreciation of the organization's efforts to promote females to such positions, in the same breath wondered if she was the right person in that place. Men's deprecating comments and women's flight from other women in the organization reflect both male dominance in society and the symbolic violence that women inflict on one another as a way of generating capital in an organization typified by masculinity.⁴⁹

The scarcity of female commanders in the organization can itself be a contributing factor to the unreasonable requirements that the women impose on themselves and others. For some of the women, it is more acceptable than it is for others to be associated with other women, but it is then of the greatest importance that the woman one associates with

⁴⁹ Bourdieu, 1998 ; 1999a : 1999b.

be the right sort of woman – a legitimate one. The legitimate woman has greater than average capital and can deal with the military profession's orthodoxy in a way worthy of imitation.

In their darkest hours, the women question the organization's will to promote gender equality, despite a clear requirement to that effect from higher authority, for want of new tools to help more female officers rise to command roles. At the same time, the male-coded orthodoxy makes it difficult for a woman just promoted to determine whether she secured her promotion on the basis of sheer merit, because she's a woman, or for any other reason. Here the shadow of feminine orthodoxy comes in: for one thing, it is important to be like a man because one believes that will provide an advantage; for another, it is no less necessary to be a sufficiently legitimate woman, so as to avoid other women's resentment.

Finally, as the Armed Forces to some extent mirror society, it can be expected that its prevailing mores, notably when it comes to family life, will impact the military. The fact that women more often than not carry the heaviest load of household tasks and childcare responsibilities at home accounts for their feeling that more is required of them to make a success of their careers. Conversely, as Ivarsson (2001) noted, the most significant changes in family life occur when it is the wife/partner and mother who advances at work, because (as this study documents) successful women make it clear to their immediate surroundings that their career has priority. Since the younger women look up to those who have succeeded in advancing in the organization, these higher-ranking pioneers become examples to emulate, holding the promise of a less complicated life for their successors. They may well be the most effective ferment of change in gender relations in the military.

It takes two to tango, and if gender meanings, identities and experiences in today's Swedish Armed Forces are to be further explored, perhaps a symmetrical interview study designed to probe the servicemen's perspective is in order.

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