

# Gender-Mixed Army Dorm Rooms, 50% Women and All-Female Special Forces Training: How Does Norway's Radical Attempt to Integrate Women in the Military Work?

By Nina Rones

Gender-mixed dormitory rooms have been introduced to ease the integration of female soldiers into the Norwegian Armed Forces. This has gained tremendous international attention,<sup>1</sup> while research has assigned several positive effects to such unisex rooms. In essence, researchers have argued that sharp distinctions and less understanding between men and women will ensue “*if female soldiers live in their own barracks or serve in their own platoons*” (Hellum, 2016, p.30); on the contrary, unisex rooms provide them with intense exposure to the opposite gender, thus promoting a gender-positive secondary socialization that will deemphasize gender differences as well as reduce sexual harassment and unwanted masculine behaviour.<sup>2</sup> Intense exposure will allegedly change gender stereotypical prejudices and combat discriminatory attitudes towards female leaders.<sup>3</sup> Also, findings such as less gossiping among girls and increased team cohesion, respect, tolerance and non-sexual camaraderie across genders are ascribed to the close contact that occurs between men and women in these rooms.<sup>4</sup>

Although these researchers seem to agree that gender-mixed rooms enhance gender equality in male-dominated military organizations, there is disagreement about the various methods used, the interpretation of shared findings, and the conclusions that can be drawn from them.<sup>5</sup> In particular, Ellingsen and colleagues (2016) urge caution in elevating the apparent success of mixed rooms to a “grand theory” where the coming together of women and men will almost magically result in gender equality and de-sexualized relationships. They ask for more research that takes into consideration the contextual situation within which the mixed rooms are introduced.

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<sup>1</sup> News articles that express astonishment over gender-mixed rooms can be found in a number of countries : <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/03/25/world/social-issues-world/norway-army-garrison-study-finds-unisex-dorms-reduce-harassment/#.WNaGufk1-Uk> ; <http://www.pressreader.com/thailand/bangkok-post/20160826/281659664462458> ; <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-08-05/norways-mixed-sex-army/5638770> ; <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/norway/2017-01-19/norways-radical-military-experiment> ; <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/mar/25/norwegian-army-sexual-harassment-claims-fell-after/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ellingsen, Lilleaas & Kimmel, 2016 ; Hellum, 2014, 2016 ; Lilleaas & Ellingsen, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Finseraas, Johnsen, Kotsadam & Torsvik, 2015a.

<sup>4</sup> Ellingsen *et al.*, 2016 ; Hellum 2014, 2016 ; Lilleaas & Ellingsen, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Ellingsen & Lilleaas, 2015 ; Ellingsen *et al.*, 2016 ; Finseraas, Johnsen, Kotsadam & Torsvik, 2015b.

In contrast to all the positive findings in the above-mentioned studies, this researcher has previously found that several gender-related adjustment problems and conflicts in the Army's gender-mixed education for non-commissioned officer (NCO) candidates in the Northern Brigade's Medical Battalion occurred because the candidates were part of a *total institution*<sup>6</sup> (Rones, 2015). A "total institution" implies that its members (in this case, men and women) work *and live* close together in an all-embracing everyday situation. Yet, sexual harassment, gender-discriminatory attitudes and gossiping by girls were part of the experience in these gender-mixed rooms.<sup>7</sup>

A much more positive situation regarding gender issues was, however, found in a recent ethnographic study of a *gender-segregated* training programme in the Norwegian Special Operations Command (NORSOC), in which conscript soldiers were organized into an all-female Special Reconnaissance (SR) Platoon (known in the media as the "Hunter Platoon"<sup>8</sup>), and an all-male Parachute Ranger (PR) Platoon.<sup>9</sup> Despite the separation of the two genders that characterized the training and quartering in this unit, the soldiers of both genders seemed to be filled with a feeling of equivalency and mutual professional esteem (Rones & Steder, 2017).

These findings question the general validity of the "exposure thesis" proposed as an explanation for the gender-positive secondary socialization that mixed-room studies have found to result when men and women bunk together. This article therefore will pursue a dual objective : (1) identify the conditions that brought these two cases to deviate from the theoretical expectations of the exposure thesis ; (2) challenge the view of gender-mixed groups as a quick-fix, or a structural treatment, to promote gender equality in a "multi-task institution" such as the Armed Forces.

This study will first review previous research on gender-mixed rooms, and problematize the in-built desire for simple, often structural, and attention-grabbing solutions to complex problems. It will then introduce the empirical material used in seeking answers to the following research questions:

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<sup>6</sup> A "total institution" (Goffman, 1961) is defined as a place of residence and work where a number of similarly situated people, cut off from the wider community, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life (p. xiii). A central feature is a breakdown of the kinds of barriers that separate the three spheres of work, leisure/ spare time and privacy/ sleep/ sex, which elsewhere is a basic social arrangement in modern society. See Bjerke & Rones (2017) for discussions on the Setermoen Army garrison as a gender-mixed total institution.

<sup>7</sup> Rones, 2015, pp.196-209, 276-284, 295-297.

<sup>8</sup> The all-female platoon has drawn a lot of international attention as "*the world's first all-female special forces*" (see e.g., Braw, 2016). "The Hunter Platoon" is a verbatim translation of the Norwegian name "Jegertroppen".

<sup>9</sup> The Parachute Ranger Platoon has been open to women since they were allowed to serve in all positions from the late 1980s onwards (Vernø & Sveri, 1990), but no women have managed to be selected to the training programme. This is mainly due to a long-lasting physically demanding admission test competition, designed to select a very small group of the physically fittest men. However, female soldiers were an operational need. Therefore, in 2014, NORSOC established the all-female Special Reconnaissance (SR) Platoon as a three-year test project (prolonged to five years), allowing women to compete for admission with other women only. A verbatim translation of "PR Platoon" would be "Parachute Hunter Platoon" (Fallskjermjegerroppen). Both platoons are, however, trained in Parachuting.

(1) What was the context that led to gender-related conflicts, including harassment, feelings of inferiority and dissatisfaction in the Army's gender-mixed training programme for NCO candidates in the Northern Brigade's Medical Battalion ?

(2) What was the context that led to a feeling of equivalency and mutual professional esteem in NORSOC's gender-segregated training for conscript soldiers ?

Based on a Bourdieusian interpretation of the findings, this article will first show that it is unlikely that gender-mixed groups (intended as a structural treatment of a male-dominated and misogynistic culture) would cause gender equality all by itself. This is because far broader, culturally acquired expectations of gender roles have been incorporated in the soldier's *habitus*, i.e. embodied schemata for interpretation, which impose on men and women tacit ideas of what they "must" do in order to avoid misrecognition or to gain recognition (Bourdieu, 2000). The case from the Medical Battalion will show how the gender-mixed group was a formation that paved the way for a traditional gendered division of internal labour, which hampered both men and women from developing skills and full confidence in tasks where the opposite gender had the power to define the expected standard. It contributed to establishing experience-based anecdotes that "confirmed" the traditional narrative that "women have nothing to do in the Armed Forces", and triggered the women to withdraw from male-dominated tasks with the feeling that they were "in fact" inferior to the men.

In contrast, the NORSOC case will show how gender-segregated training, with equal resources and priority, provided the women with a space to develop skills and competence in the most male-dominated tasks, without being competed with, judged or overrun by men. Since the single-sex group also rendered any gendered division of internal labour impossible, the women were also "forced" to take the main responsibility for traditional male tasks, and so reinforce their skills acquisition. Thus, the women in NORSOC's all-female SR Platoon acquired skills that enabled them to handle "hard core" military tasks with confidence. Consequently, an experience-based narrative of women as capable and highly competent in military skills was developed in this unit. This suggests that, belying the "exposure thesis", separation in single-sex groups can be a fruitful pedagogical method for breaking up traditional men's and women's roles and promoting skills acquisition in areas dominated by the opposite gender. Accordingly, the article argues that access to unobstructed skills development (learning), under supportive authorities that are in a position to change the negative narrative on women's military capabilities and relevance, is instrumental in breaking down gender prejudices and lifting women's role and status in the military. This proves more effective than men's exposure to women in all aspects of daily life, which can as easily serve to harden negative prejudices towards females in the military as to change them.

### **Previous Research on Gender-Mixed Rooms**

Gender-mixed dorm rooms have been used in Sweden since 1990. In Norway, male and female teammates have bunked together in tents, snow caves and other forms of

shelter since women were allowed to serve. In 2008, the Norwegian Army introduced gender-mixed rooms in some garrisons, first at the soldiers' representatives request<sup>10</sup> in the garrison that guards the Norwegian-Russian boarder, and then in the Northern Brigade's Medical Battalion. Several other units have followed suit since 2010. In the rest of the world, gender-mixed rooms are seen as rather peculiar, and it seems as if mixed rooms have only been empirically studied in Norway.<sup>11</sup>

First, sociologists Lilleaas and Ellingsen (2014) published their results from a comparative case study carried out in a large training camp for Navy recruits (KNM Harald Haarfagre), where women and men had separate rooms, and in the smaller and popular Norwegian-Russian Border Guard (Gsv), where men and women bunked together. In some 70 qualitative interviews, the mixed rooms took a lot of credit for the good relationship that existed between the men and women at Gsv. In the Navy camp, the researchers found that the girls' rooms fell outside the information flow and were riddled with conflicts and cliques. Lilleaas and Ellingsen (2014) explained their positive findings from Gsv by drawing on Thomas Pettigrew's (1998) inter-group contact theory, which postulates that minority and majority groups can improve their relations by getting closer to each other.

Following this study, the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI) was given the assignment of further scrutinizing the consequences of mixed-gender rooms in the military. Social anthropologist Hellum (2014) carried out fieldwork in which she lived a full week in a gender-mixed room in two different Army camps in the Northern Brigade, carrying out 44 qualitative interviews with leaders and soldiers during the two weeks. In both camps, she found signs of an abrasive masculinity culture, and the opinion of male soldiers that mixed rooms were a positive arrangement that seemed to diminish the vulgarity of this culture, since the other men behaved better with women present.

Moreover, Hellum found that the opinion of both men and women was that all-female rooms were characterized by conflict and intrigue. Accordingly, women preferred to live with men in mixed rooms, and men thought the quarrelsome women were better off in gender-mixed rooms. The soldiers who lived in mixed rooms spoke of each other as sisters and brothers, and Hellum concluded that frequent and intimate exposure to the opposite sex is most likely to lead to de-gendered family-like relationships which reduce sexual tension and break down myths and prejudices. That in turn leads to better integration and cooperation (pp.4, 31).

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<sup>10</sup> The background for the Gsv soldiers' request for mixed rooms was that they lived together with their team when off-duty inside the garrison also, meaning that female team-members were separated from their team during this period. While on Border Service, the whole team bunked together in shelters, and the women were (of course) much more included with the guys. Not all camps have practised "team living" in garrison, and single-sex rooms have been less exclusive in such situations. However, in some camps the women's room has been situated in a different corridor or even barracks from the men's room instead of just next to it, again leaving the women outside the information flow and spare-time interactions (field conversations and observations). It is thus clear that mixed rooms have solved some problems that arose as a result of an exclusionary room assignment policy and localization in some camps. However, that does not mean that gender-mixed rooms automatically have a de-gendering effect.

<sup>11</sup> Ellingsen *et al.*, 2016 ; Fuglset, 2015.

The qualitative studies were criticized for lack of objectivity and limited opportunity to ensure that it was the gender-mixed rooms that caused the positive effect.<sup>12</sup> Also, the risk of “politically correct” behaviour in the presence of a researcher and the difficulties of observing unconscious prejudices and attitudes were pointed out as weaknesses. To test the causal effect of gender-mixed rooms on discrimination, and enable observations of hidden/unconscious prejudices, quantitative experiments were suggested as a methodological solution.<sup>13</sup>

Together, economists from FFI,<sup>14</sup> the Norwegian Social Research (NOVA) and the Institute for Social Research<sup>15</sup> (ISF) asked the Army’s Northern Brigade to randomly assign a cohort of conscripted soldiers to gender-mixed and gender-uniform rooms, as a field experiment. The soldiers were given a survey at the time of enrolment, and again after eight weeks of basic training.<sup>16</sup> Of 1,476 soldiers who answered the survey questions at both enrolment and after 8 weeks, about 27 per cent of the males and 100 per cent of the females were assigned to gender-mixed rooms, but the randomization was confirmed only in three out of the eight battalions.

With reference to Pettigrew’s contact hypothesis, Finseraas and colleagues aimed to test how negative prejudice towards female leaders was affected by exposure to the opposite gender in mixed rooms, and combined the field experiment with a vignette experiment on a smaller sample of the field experiment participants. They found that 78 men who had lived in gender-mixed rooms with 31 women in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion (light infantry, randomization confirmed), were less likely to discriminate against a fictional female squad leader than 367 men from the same battalion who had lived in an all-male room during the eight-week long training period. Finseraas *et al.* argue that this must mean that close exposure to female colleagues in the mixed room has helped to change prejudice and teach the men to see beyond stereotypes and assumptions about gender. They conclude that the experiments have “*shown that the glass ceiling that prevents female candidates to obtain leader positions in a masculine context can be broken by exposure*” (p.17).

Analyzing the survey questions in the three battalions which followed the randomization procedure (2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Artillery Battalion and Armoured Battalion) Kostadam and Johansen (2015) and Hanson *et al.* (2016) do not find any effects on overall well-being, on plans to continue, on bullying or on sexual harassment for men being randomly exposed to live with women. They point out that these findings may not necessarily be generalized to apply to other defence branches or types of service. And unfortunately, they could not investigate the effects of mixed rooms on women as there were too few women living in all-female rooms, thus no control group to compare the women in gender-mixed rooms with those in all-female living quarters. Still, in

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<sup>12</sup> For debates observed in the research field, see for instance Finseraas *et al.*, 2015b.

<sup>13</sup> See Finseraas *et al.*, 2015a, 2015b ; Hanson, Steder & Kvalvik, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Hanson *et al.*, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Finseraas *et al.*, 2015a.

<sup>16</sup> *The Northern Brigade Study* ; see also FFI, 2017; Fuglset, 2015; and Kostadam & Johnsen, 2015 for results from the same dataset.

summarizing the Northern Brigade vignette experiment and survey questions, the popular scientific magazine *Viten* (FFI, 2017) claimed in conclusion that “[i]f men and women live and work close together, they will learn to look beyond stereotypes and presumption about gender” (p.15). And further, that serving together to a greater extent is a possibility that “contributes to less discriminatory attitudes towards women, inside and outside the Norwegian Armed Forces” (FFI, 2017, p.15).

Ellingsen and colleagues (2016) question the realism of the fictional squad leaders the recruits were presented to in the vignette experiment, and criticize Finseraas *et al.*'s claim that close contact between the sexes will ease the integration of women into male-dominated workplaces and make the glass ceiling disappear outside the Armed Forces also. Yet, they state that Finseraas *et al.*'s findings have strengthened their hypothesis that “something” is working inside the gender-mixed rooms, and argue that this effect might best be understood as a gender-positive secondary socialization, in line with Pettigrew's contact theory which depends on the presence of several other factors such as support from authorities, common goals, real cooperation and the establishment of equal status for the two groups.

### **The Number of Women**

The above-mentioned research was initiated as a consequence of White Paper N°36 (2006–2007) on increased recruitment of women to the Norwegian Armed Forces. The White Paper (p.20) refers to Kanter's (1977) theory that a minority will no longer be treated as *tokens*<sup>17</sup> when they reach a critical mass that is assumed to be over 15-20 percent, and called for serious measures to be taken to increase the share of women in the Norwegian Armed Forces to at least 20 per cent by 2020.<sup>18</sup>

In the light of Kanter's causal link between the percentage figure and the problems she analyses by means of the token concept, Ellingsen *et al.* (2016) suggest that it seems paradoxical to find a more hostile environment towards women in the camp with the highest percentage of women: the naval base with single-sex rooms and approximately 20 percent women. They find this situation to be more in line with Yoder (1991), who criticizes Kanter for being hung up on the effects of numbers. Yoder refers to a considerable number of studies that have shown that an increased share of women arouses fear and scepticism among the dominant men, and increases gender discrimination in the forms of sexual harassment and wage inequalities (p.178). This is also in line with my previous findings from the decentralized Army Officer Candidate School, in which the most hostile environment for females was found in the Medical Battalion where there were 50-52 percent women in the officer candidate platoon (Rones, 2015, pp.207-208, 275-283).

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<sup>17</sup> The *token* concept reflects Kanter's finding that persons who do not possess the same (often visible) characteristics as the numerically dominant group (that was women in a male-dominated organization), were often viewed more as representative icons of their category than as individuals. The concept has been widely used to explain women's (poor) achievement, (negative) experiences and (queen-bee-like) behavioural responses in male-dominated organizations in terms of numerical proportion, suggesting that barriers to women's full occupational equality can be lowered by the hiring of more women (Zimmer, 1988, p.64).

<sup>18</sup> On such claims, also see Kristiansen *et al.*, 2008 ; Kristiansen & Steder, 2015.

On the other hand, Lilleaas and Ellingsen's (2014) gender-positive mixed-room case (from the Army's Border Guard) and Hellum's equally positive 2014 study were conducted in units with fewer than 10 percent women. Hellum (2014) thus emphasizes that her study has some limitations, since the women were highly motivated volunteers<sup>19</sup> who had a high tolerance of masculine jargon, and were willing to adapt and adhere to the men's values and standards of behaviour. The share of women in *The Northern Brigade Study*'s sample was also mostly below "critical mass", ranging from 7 to 20 percent, with 18 percent in the Medical Battalion and 20 percent in the Combat Support Battalion that was left out of the analysis of gender-mixed room effects due to lack of confirmed randomization (Hanson *et al.*, 2016, p.29). Yet, the sample reflects a gendered division of the labour at (meso) organizational level, with most women in the medical and combat support services (see Netland, 2013 ; Steder, 2014).

However, in an anthropological fieldwork on *The Norwegian Air and Missile Defence Battalions* self-initiated experiment of a 50/50 division between conscripted men and women, Hellum (2016) finds a friendly and de-gendered environment. Through three week-long stays and 71 interviews, she found no signs of the sexualized and abrasive masculinity culture she saw signs of in her previous study in the Army (Hellum, 2014). There was a tendency towards gendered clique formation, but the soldiers believed that the gender-mixed rooms slowed this tendency. Also, in this study Hellum (2016) concludes that a constant and intimate mixed-room exposure to the opposite gender increases tolerance, acceptance and understanding, challenges stereotypes and reduces gender tensions and harassment. She argues that the 50/50 division was a key to a more gender-neutral culture, since the men were no longer in a majority that could set the tone (pp.29-30, 32), and claims that an increase in female troops can reduce unwanted masculine behaviours in the armed forces (p.38).

Yet, if instead of relying on Kanter's legacy we look to Zimmer (1988) and later Yoder (1991) and Alexander and Thoits (1985), "[i]t is not at all clear [...] that it is small numbers that are responsible for the most serious problems women face in non-traditional settings" (p.69). Zimmer refers to several studies which found that an increased share of women seemed to exacerbate women's occupational problems rather than alleviating them, and criticizes Kanter's suggestion that it is organizational structures and numbers, rather than people and much broader systems of cultural inequalities, that must change (pp.71-72). As an anthropologist, Hellum (2016) adds indeed that an equal share of men and women will not automatically be a success in other units, since this will depend on the culture. Nevertheless, she refers to behavioural economist Bohnet's (2016a) work on gender equality by design, where it is claimed that we can nudge<sup>20</sup> people in a desired

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<sup>19</sup> All the studies presented in this article were conducted before Norway's gender-neutral conscription, which took effect with the summer 2016 contingent. Since 1985, women have, however, been allowed to volunteer for service, taking on all the same duties as conscripted men.

<sup>20</sup> See Thaler and Sunstein's widely endorsed and best-selling 2008 book *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness*, strongly based on the work of psychologist Daniel Kahneman, who won the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences for his work on judgment errors (biases and heuristics) and decision-making.

direction regarding gender equality through behavioural design (see Bohnet, 2016b). For instance, when crafting groups, Bohnet suggests Kanter's theory on critical mass as a possible push, or "treatment", that can promote the desirable outcome, and Hellum refers to gender-mixed rooms as something that can nudge the organization towards gender equality.

According to Bohnet (2016b), effective designs can be achieved by running trials, e.g. field and vignette experiments, that reveal whether a "treatment" works or not. In line with this view, Hanson and colleagues explain that studying the effects of exposure to gender-mixed rooms, referred to as the treatment, is a central policy question for the Norwegian Armed Forces. They write : "*If prejudice can be combated by placing privates with different gender and/ or ethnicity in the same room or team, it can provide a valuable contribution to the recruitment to the Armed Forces*" (2016, p.9). Behavioural economics, including nudge theory and experimental analysis of behaviour, has been increasingly popular among policymakers,<sup>21</sup> and is increasingly criticized for applying simple and mathematically controllable solutions to complex social problems.<sup>22</sup> There is also compelling evidence that the majority of cause-effect discoveries concerning human behaviours, and the effectiveness of the strategies meant to change them, will not stand the test of time. This is claimed to be due to (a) methodological issues such as small sample sizes, including a lack of statistical power analysis, (b) a drive/ pressure to publish novel results, not least media-friendly single findings,<sup>23</sup> as well as (c) aspects of social reality which make it difficult to establish simple, isolated cause-effect relations – notably, to be certain that the same thing will happen in the same manner in different contexts.<sup>24</sup>

That brings us to this article's concern: if the exposure thesis (gender-mixed rooms) and the critical mass hypothesis work as structural treatments that promote gender equality *by design*, we should expect the gender-mixed training in the Medical Battalion to have been a success regarding gender equality. That was not the case, and attention needs to be drawn to a combination of several factors that caused gender trouble and dissatisfaction in that case. The case will be contrasted with the gender-segregated training for conscripted men and women in NORSOC. It was NORSOC themselves who came up with the idea of establishing an all-female SR Platoon alongside the PR Platoon, and, when the plan was launched, it was met with criticism and scepticism from people who argued that an all-female platoon was "counterproductive" and the direct opposite of gender equality, as illustrated in the empirical material:

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<sup>21</sup> See for instance: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/first-obama-now-america-embraces-nudge-theory-2050127.html>

<sup>22</sup> See e.g., Harford, 2014 ; Rollman, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> An unfortunate competition for ownership of novel discoveries is in particular revealed in Ellingsen and Lilleaas (2015) and Ellingsen *et al.* (2016) repeated underlining that they were the first to uncover the surprisingly positive effect of the mixed room. It can also be questioned to what degree the world-news potential of the mixed rooms as a positive "quick fix" for military culture and gender-problems makes some of the researchers blind towards findings that do not support the desired effects of percentage figure and mixed rooms.

<sup>24</sup> See for instance : Begley & Ioannidis, 2015 ; Chang & Li, 2015 ; Open Science Collaboration, 2015.

At the Armed Forces Equality Conference, it was like: “Hey you who are into affirmative actions and special treatment” [...] It was a bit made fun of. We were invited to give a speech, and it was like: “That’s a bit silly then. Giving a speech at the equality conference on a platoon which is not about equality.” There have been some sarcasm and a lot of ignorance (Officer, NORSOC).

The critique against the all-female SR Platoon is also visible in a Norwegian War Academy bachelor’s thesis by B. Kristoffersen (2017). He writes that gender segregation is normally not referred to as gender equality, and aims therefore to explore how the all-female SR Platoon fits into its principles. By interviewing the initiators, he finds that the ideas behind the all-female SR Platoon in particular agree with principles of diversity and time-limited “positive special treatment”, aimed at equalization of gender differences as described by the Norwegian Ministry of Children and Equality.

Against this background, the aim of this article is to identify the context that brought the Medical Battalion and NORSOC cases to deviate from the theoretical and maybe ideological expectations that seem to dominate the Norwegian narrative on how to attain gender equality in the Armed Forces.

## **On Methods and Fieldwork Locations**

### **The Medical Battalion’s (Gender-Mixed) Training Platoon for NCO Candidates**

The empirical material on the NCO candidate educational platoon in the Medical Battalion was gathered through multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork on the Army’s Officer Candidate School.<sup>25</sup> Results have been previously presented in my PhD dissertation (Rones, 2015). Multi-site study was necessary because of a combination of joint education and decentralized service specialization periods that took place in nine different battalions. Social interactions were investigated through 72 days of participant observation spread over 12 months. During service specialization, the participant observation took place in the Medical Battalion and the Armoured Battalion, both located at Setermoen Garrison in Northern Norway. In total, 65 interviews were recorded during the fieldwork, from 18 female and 16 male candidates, specializing in four different battalions, and 7 female and 15 male officers/ instructors.<sup>26</sup>

The educational platoon in the Medical Battalion started out with approximately 25 selected aspirants and close to 50 per cent women increasing to 52 per cent during the year due to having more male drop-outs. In the other services, there were 1–3 women among approximately 25 candidates. Only the candidates in the Medical Battalion lived in gender-mixed rooms. The candidates ranged from 18 to 24 in age, and most of them had no prior military experience. The empirical material was analysed in MaxQda 11. Codes and categories were developed from the content in the material, inspired by Kathy Charmaz’s (2006) constructivist interpretation of grounded theory. The most hostile environment for

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<sup>25</sup> The education consists of one year of schooling and one year of guided compulsory service as squad leader, drill instructor or similar.

<sup>26</sup> Six of the candidates and three of the officers were interviewed twice.

women, and the greatest male dissatisfaction with women in the Armed Forces, was found in the Medical Battalion this particular year (Rones, 2015, pp.207-208, 275-283).

### **The Special Forces Command's (Gender-Segregated) Training Platoons for Conscripts**

In 2014, NORSOC launched an all-female training programme for specially selected female conscripts, i.e. the all-female SR Platoon, as a trial project. Most of the training takes place separated from but alongside NORSOC's regular training programme for specially selected (male) conscripts in the PR Platoon, though some of the vocational education is common, for instance the parachute course. The regular training programme has been open to women since the late 1980s, but no woman has competed successfully with men in the physically demanding competition to win a position among the selected few,<sup>27</sup> and this is part of the reason why NORSOC wanted to try out a dedicated training programme for women only. Both platoons are part of the NORSOC's Training Wing.

Similarly to the NCO candidates in the Medical Battalion, the conscripts in the all-female SR Platoon and the PR Platoon are specially selected women and men. The NORSOC conscripts ranged from 18 to 25 in age, and none had previous military experience. Together, the two platoons in NORSOC's Training Wing started out with approximately the same number of soldiers as the NCO platoon, and as many women as men. The three platoons were all training platoons and had in common that they functioned somewhat apart from the larger unit's daily endeavours. Thus, the cases should be comparable with regards to size, share of women, age, military experience and role within their unit. A limitation is, however, that the men and women in the Medical Battalion case had been specially selected for squad-leadership education whereas the men and women in the NORSOC case were specially selected for a squaddie education, the first prioritizing competitive and dominant qualities, the second cooperative qualities.

The empirical material from NORSOC's Training Wing was gathered as a result of FFI being assigned to contribute with an external evaluation of the all-female training programme. In this regard, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork, consisting of 28 days of participant observation of the second cohort,<sup>28</sup> spread over 14 months (starting with a preparatory training weekend for prospective applicants in April 2015, and ending with programme closure at the end of June 2016). In addition to the participant observation, I conducted 64 qualitative interviews with women in the second cohort (2015-2016), women from the first cohort who had continued in the Armed Forces after completed training, men in the PR Platoon and different instructors and leaders of the Training Wing.

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<sup>27</sup> Approximately 1,400 applicants are shortlisted to 300-400 recruits who compete for +/- 15 places, which means that as low a share as 1 percent of the applicants, or 4 percent of those who meet for the selection preparation and exercises (approximately 4-5 weeks) are admitted as aspirants. For comparison, there have been approximately 5,000 applicants to the Norwegian Armed Forces Officer Candidate Schools, of whom 1,400 meet for the selection preparation and exercises and compete for some 600 places. This means that 12 percent of the applicants, or 43 percent of those who meet for the 2-3-week long selection are admitted.

<sup>28</sup> The Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation, NRK, had also made a documentary *Jenter for Norge* [Girls for Norway] on the Hunter platoon, following the same cohort as I did through the whole year.

The empirical material was coded and categorized in MaxQda 11, using Charmaz's suggestion for doing grounded theory. The MaxQda analysis makes it possible to compare the conditions that caused gendered conflicts, harassment, feelings of inequality and dissatisfaction in the Medical Battalion case with the conditions that caused feelings of equivalency, mutual esteem and satisfaction in the NORSOC case.

Only the relationship between the group of men and the group of women will be discussed in this article. This is because of space limitations and the impression that the relationship between the two genders was more impacted by the mixed-room situation than were relations among the women, or among the men.

## **Results**

### **Traditional Gender Roles and Gendered Power Struggle in the Medical Battalion's Gender-Mixed Training**

#### *Men's Stuff, Women's Stuff and the Gendered Division of Labour*

A finding from the multi-sited fieldwork on the NCO training was that different identities and statuses cohered around the different things and equipment which the different battalions and units were able to use, as well as their specific work tasks. For instance, the almost all-male Armoured Battalion's culture and identity were characterized by heavy vehicles, which were classified as masculine, powerful, aggressive and brutal. According to Bourdieu (2000), a classification often implies a simultaneous ascribing of value and status, and many said the Armoured Battalion was the most popular (high-status) battalion because they had the "coolest toys". It was also said that the vehicles took up so much space that it was impossible to arrive somewhere without being perceived as macho, signalling how the equipment, its size and power, could give people using it a certain status and identity (Rones, 2015, pp.252-254).

An important context in the Medical Battalion was, however, that its distinct equipment and dedicated tasks were classified as feminine. The men had the experience that they were looked upon as "wimps" and "nurses in uniform". Many believed it was the "natural" place for women to apply, and it was nicknamed "the girl battalion" (pp.280-283). Many women had served there before, but the year the fieldwork was conducted was the first time they had received a platoon of 50 per cent women. Politicians had recently made a public claim that increasing the share of women in the Armed Forces was no longer an option but an order (pp.14-15). Thus, officers in both the Medical Battalion and the neighbouring Armoured Battalion believed that "someone" in the military leadership had seen their chance to increase the total number of women in the Norwegian Armed Forces by assigning a lot of women to the Medical Battalion:

It is natural that more women apply there. Hence, also, I believe that it is easy to take the chance to get more women in there, if you think about it a bit cynically (Officer, Armoured Battalion).

The “natural” assignment of the expected “feminine persons” (i.e. women) to a “feminine service” mirrors Bourdieu’s (2000) claim that *the gender order* is grounded in the classification of things and activities according to the opposition between feminine and masculine. Since we have learned to ascribe both a gender and a status to different things and activities (incorporated in habitus), we immediately have a feeling of which category of people the different things and activities are meant for. We “just know” that a nurse’s apron is meant for a woman, and camouflage trousers for a man. According to Bourdieu, such incorporated schemata of classification cause the distribution of the sexes to remain in accordance with the “order of things”, as people often say to refer to something they believe is “natural” (pp.15-16).

The division of men and women into respectively combat and logistical support positions in the Northern Brigade (meso-level) has previously been described and documented by Netland (2013, p.31.) But, as Netland partly suggests, at micro-level also, inside the gender-mixed NCO platoon where all men and women had the same formal position and training, a gendered division of internal labour emerged that cohered around gendered equipment.

The gendered division of internal labour became particularly visible when the NCO candidates returned to base after exercises and went into the “boring” phase of clean-up and maintenance. The candidates were often exhausted and instructors often “disappeared” to check out who took an extra shift, and who were “eye servers”, i.e. people who do the right thing only when observed by authorities. From their “hidden” positions, the instructors also observed that the self-organized phase often produced a division of tasks by gender according to “boy toys and girl toys”:

**Interviewer** : Does everybody contribute during maintenance ?

**Medical Battalion Officer** : Yes. But there are some that do very much more than others. If we take periodic control of vehicles, for example, then there are some who are more interested in that, while others are more interested in the medical equipment, while there are some who are not so interested at all and slip through. [...]

**Interviewer**: Who will take responsibility for the medical equipment ?

**Medical Battalion Officer** : Usually the girls. It’s like boy toys and girl toys.

### *Hampering Skill Acquisition through a Self-Reinforcing Process of Fixed Tasks and Roles*

So it comes as little surprise, if one bears in mind what Bourdieu describes as a process of identification and dis-identification with the classification of the objects, that the women took care of the small clean objects inside, while the men took care of the bigger dirty objects outside, such as tents, heating systems, generators and vehicles. When asked, the candidates were aware of this gendered division of labour themselves. A female candidate tried, however, to argue that it was not *because* of gender, but because the men were more interested in the vehicles and managed to take care of them in a shorter time, while the women were quicker with the medical equipment :

**Interviewer** : What are you going to do now ?

**Female Medical NCO Candidate**: Maintenance [...].

**Interviewer** : How do you do the maintenance ?

**Female Medical NCO Candidate** : Usually, we have some who take care of the vehicles and some who take care of the medical equipment.

**Interviewer**: How do you decide who does what ?

**Female Medical NCO Candidate**: It depends on what people want. Everybody can manage everything. But it's often that the guys really want to take care of the vehicles and we girls... "yes, here you are." It doesn't matter. As long as everything is done, then – it is a bit about time pressure too. If you know that the guys maintain the car in 30 minutes and two girls will spend maybe an hour, and the guys will spend maybe an hour on the medical equipment, for example [...] So, it is a bit about what works best, what is the most effective [...].

**Interviewer** : So, it is distributed on the basis of gender?

**Female Medical NCO Candidate**: No, not because of it. There are many girls who can take care of the vehicles. But often the guys are a little more interested in it, and they want to do the vehicles.

In the organized training, the candidates were often assigned to different roles in turn, and they received the same instruction in all tasks. However, it was in the practical handling of the equipment that knowledge was transformed into real skills. Thus, since it was the men who took care of the vehicles from the beginning, they were the ones who acquired the skills to maintain them with confidence and in a short time. This early division of labour had a self-reinforcing effect that hampered gender-crossing skill acquisition : in the maintenance phase, the question of effectiveness linked the genders more and more strongly to the "fixed" tasks and roles they had already mastered.

However, when it came closer to the time when the NCO candidates would become medical squad leaders and instructors themselves, it seemed as if the men felt that they needed to learn to maintain the medical equipment at a proper level themselves, and thus they started to ask the women to switch roles :

But lately several guys have come over and said: "Can't we do the medical equipment now ?" – "Yes, yes, here you are". It's all the same as long as everything is done (Female medical NCO candidate).

The fact that the guys came over and asked the women: "*can't we do the medical equipment now ?*" shows that the medical equipment was an arena where it was the women who were in authority. The women both regulated the men's access (to learning) and had the power to set the standards. For instance, when the men were given access to the medical equipment, the women made sure that everything was done correctly, i.e. according to the women's standard, before the officers' inspection. This irritated the men. Not only had their skills been developed to a lower level than the women's, they were also corrected by the women.

### *Men on the Women's Domain : Obeying with Misogynist Comments*

In addition, the women had authority over attire and low-status objects such as wash bins and rags, allowing them to engage in irritating “behaviour correction” of their male peers when it came to uniform, and the standards of cleanliness and organization inside the tents and the gender-mixed rooms, i.e. in the domestic arena. For instance, some of the women would demand that the men who challenged the dominant requirements on how to wear the uniform should “fasten their buttons” and “put on their caps” in accordance with the requirements, and the women would criticize, guide and control the men in the activity of washing (Rones, 2015, pp.255-257).

In practice, the men subordinated themselves and obeyed the women's demands in the domestic domain, but they often seemed to respond with derogatory or misogynistic comments. For instance, when a man put on his headgear on a woman's command, he could mumble “jerk” to the other men, signalling that this was not important. Similarly, when obeying a command on housework, the men would respond more directly to the women with comments such as “*womenfolk*”, “*ahhrg, go back to the kitchen*”, signalling that “*okay, I will do it, but this is unnecessarily pedantic and womanish*”.<sup>29</sup> So, at the same time as the men obeyed the women's dominance and authority in the domestic area in practice, they reconstructed their *symbolic* dominance, and thus the gender hierarchy (order), by discursively subordinating the women and their tasks and standards through the use of derogatory and misogynistic comments. Degrading comments seemed, in other words, to be a method the men used to replace themselves in a position of authority over the women.<sup>30</sup> It also shows how the men ultimately had the power to classify the women and issues they considered important.

### *Men on the Gender-Mixed Rooms*

Yet the comments did not seem to resolve the men's irritation over having to adjust themselves to the women's standards and judgment. In interviews conducted during the autumn, most of the men expressed dissatisfaction with living in the gender-mixed rooms and warned that the situation could “explode”. When the researcher returned in the spring, the officers said that the men had rebelled and insisted that they move into all-male rooms (pp.208-209, 276-284). The officers explained the situation, in line with Yoder (1991) and Zimmer's (1988) critique of Kanter (1977), claiming that the men had reached a point where they now felt threatened, since there were so many women in the platoon. The men

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<sup>29</sup> Bjerke and Rones (2017) show how the establishment of “joking relationships” (Radcliffe-Brown) allowed the men to joke about the women's quest for cleanliness and ridicule such things that were typically important for the women but not for the men. Such joking relationships balance on a very thin line between what is funny and what is offensive.

<sup>30</sup> Mumbling derogatory and unfavourable comments to male peers was also something that the men, both candidates and instructors, did when they obeyed higher male officers. This kind of commenting seemed to be a method subordinate military men use to turn the military hierarchy upside down in their discourse, placing themselves in the position of symbolic (but not real) dominance over more senior officers (Rones, 2015, p.257).

themselves emphasized that they had “*no problems with being in a platoon with women*”, but that living in the same room as them brought many other factors into play. They felt that the mixed-gender situation created more barriers – more decent informal norms – for what they could say and do, reflecting the argument of men in male-dominated services who wanted women in their service or room because it “forces” the other men to behave themselves (Hellum, 2014; Rones, 2015, p. 271).

The men in the Medical Battalion said for instance that they needed to be more sensitive to avoid episodes of crying, conflicts and over-interpretations of jokes. They said that the room challenged their intimacy zones, and that they were afraid that the women would interpret friendly un-sexual behaviour, such as a pat on the shoulder, to mean “something more”, like an invitation. It can thus be argued that the gender-mixed room situation did not give the men a break from the usual sexually loaded type of relationship between the genders, as is suggested by Ellingens *et al.* (2016, p.5) and Hellum (2014, 2016). On the contrary, it seemed that the room situation kept them constantly alert over sexual tensions.<sup>31</sup>

In addition, the men were sometimes annoyed because the women got up early to get ready and woke up the guys who wanted to sleep longer. In the evenings, the performance-oriented women who were “switched on” all the time, gave them no space just to lie on the bed and relax. Not least, the men were irritated by all “those little things” the women tended to emphasize :

I wish that we had purely male rooms, because there are so many small things with girls, so much talking and worrying over little things that many boys do not bother about (Male medical NCO candidate).

### *Unequal Investments and Daily Routines in a Uniform Institution*

The women’s investment in “little things” that the men did not bother about signifies how the women’s authority in the domestic arena was linked to a *responsibility* for low-status (“little”) tasks, such as organizing “the military family’s” everyday life and keeping “the home” in respectable order, which is the typical mother’s role.

Probably, the “little things” were important for the women, because they were aware that, according to social norms, it is most often the woman, and not the man, who is held responsible, and thus judged, for sloppiness when someone enters a messy home with a lazy and unorganized family. Thus, the women might also sense that they would profit from putting effort into the “unimportant” and “unnecessary” small tasks, despite this

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<sup>31</sup> Neither the Medical Battalion case, nor the NORSOC case support Hellum’s (2014, pp.22-24, 40; 2016, 48-51, 62) claim that a close mixed-room exposure to the opposite gender leads to family-like relationships that reduce sexual attraction between the soldiers. On the contrary, a NORSOC officer said that they had accepted that sexual relationships could occur *due to the close exposure*, and that they therefore had an express policy on “professional behaviour”. And as Hellum also finds, the zero-tolerance of non-professional behaviour seemed to have had a preventative effect on men and women who did not want to spoil their military careers. But basically, none of these case studies can draw conclusions about the mixed-rooms’ effect on sexual attraction, and most likely learning to know one other will sometimes lead to attraction, and sometimes not.

investment following some logic, rules and norms that the men did not understand, since their identity as men rests on a different set of valuation criteria.<sup>32</sup>

Also, according to social norms, men and women are expected to manage their bodies in distinct and *different* ways. As Bourdieu notes, women tend to be encouraged *more* than men to develop their bodies as *objects* of perception for others. Therefore, when the women get up “*thirty to forty-five minutes before the men to fix themselves up*”, and thus wake up and irritate the men, it can be considered a “forced investment” that the women *must* make in order to be judged as *respectable* women, because their feminine identity and status are determined by *others’ valuation of their appearance* (“the body for others”).

As Bourdieu (2000) and Skeggs (1997) explain, the social process of inculcation and socialization imposes upon men and women different sets of dispositions in habitus (tacit ideas) with regard to what they “must” do in order to avoid misrecognition and gain recognition. This “forces” men and women to engage in *unequal “acts of recognition”*, which impacts directly on their behaviour and daily routines. Such unequal acts of recognition and subsequent unequal daily routines seemed to cause some friction in the gender-mixed rooms that can be understood with reference to the total institution’s request for common and standardized behaviour, including equal dress, equal system and order and equal daily routines.<sup>33</sup>

The all-embracing (total) military institution’s system of equality has traditionally been adjusted to men, and as Hellum (2014) argues, the women who have entered the military and live in gender-mixed rooms as “one of the (minority) guys” seem to have been prepared and willing to adapt to the men’s premises, standards and daily routines. In the case of the Medical Battalion, the men, however, had to take into account the women’s feelings, standards and routines. The men probably lacked the willingness to adjust to the

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<sup>32</sup> In a study of the NCO Candidate School’s Joint Selection, Rones and Hellum (2013) found that male peers had a tendency to judge women’s potential as military squad leaders according to their capacity to fill the role as the squad’s mother/ bigger sister, something which required the women to be “*structured*”, “*punctual and pertinent*”. This was, in particular, visible in the practice of “buddy ranking”. The men often ranked the squad’s men according to their physical capacity (see also Rones & Fasting, 2015), keeping the women, as something different, outside of it, by ranking them either favourably as number one, i.e. the team’s mother, or at the bottom, with the argument that she was “a scatterbrain”. With the mother role, however, comes a distinct responsibility. For example, despite the positive conclusion in Hellum (2016), the report also includes a story about two organized females who were given a “mother role” over some males with poor hygienic standards as judged by the officers. The two women had to move into two different rooms with a faint hint of their responsibility for “raising” each group of men, leaving them with the feeling that they had to clean up after the men (pp.41-42). Nevertheless, Hellum (2016) claims her empirical material shows that male soldiers did not need to be “raised” by women over cleaning. As evidence, she refers to an episode in which she, as an embedded researcher, was denied the opportunity to take part in the room cleaning before morning inspection by a male soldier who did not trust anybody else to do it as thoroughly as himself. Hellum thus suggests that order and cleanliness are a case of personality. There are, of course, personality differences in this regard, but Beverly Skeggs (1997) shows how women, particularly from the working-class (without a history of domestic servants), feel that they are judged according to their capacity to keep their environment in respectable order, making the issue of cleaning and systems very much a gender and class issue.

<sup>33</sup> Goffman, 1961; see also Rones, 2015a, pp. 295-297.

opposite gender in the same way as the women who had entered the military with the knowledge that they were entering a man's world. Moreover, the impression gained from the tensions and struggles observed in this study is that, in situations where the men obeyed, subordinated themselves or adapted to women in authority or power in practice, they used misogynistic and degrading comments to reinstate themselves in the dominant position.

### *Harassment and Women's Withdrawal from the Men's Domain*

The men were so irritated by the women in the gender-mixed room that they went to the officers and asked for “*a divorce*”; the women, for their part, felt so “*trampled*”, harassed and discriminated against by the men's ridiculing comments and behaviour that they also reported it to those in charge. The officers said that they had not previously experienced anything similar to the gender discrimination that had occurred in the first-year officer candidate platoon. Faced with a repeat situation, second-year female candidates linked the gender trouble and harassment that they had experienced directly to the high number of women in the battalion, and the fact that the men and women lived so closely together in gender-mixed rooms. This latter point is illustrated in the following quote:

Towards the end of the school year a bad atmosphere between the men and the women developed [...] Like, we started to upset each other, maybe. We lived close to each other. It's a whole year [...] And there was a lot of kidding, just like women nagging. Sort of joking, that really was taken too far (female medical NCO candidate).<sup>34</sup>

The same story was told by another second-year female candidate, who also linked the discrimination to the high number of women and the image stuck on the battalion as a result:

But to collect all the girls in one battalion, in the Medical Battalion, it might not be such a clever move when we are already seen as the Girly Battalion, where all the girls are, and things like that. It can make it worse. [...] There is a lot of discrimination going on, which we experienced to a great extent [...] But when during the final exercise we were in mixed squads with those [male candidates] from the Artillery and the Armoured battalion, then we did not experience the same thing. They had one girl in each battalion, and we felt like we were welcomed in a very different way than we were in our battalion (female medical NCO candidate).<sup>35</sup>

The male candidates' harassment of the females in the Medical Battalion is likely to have been further amplified by the need to reconstruct their self-image as masculine in a context in which the battalion and service or expertise with which they were associated was classified as feminine, puny, weak and “half gay”. This classification had the following consequence, as expressed by one of the male candidates : “*But it is also that we*

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<sup>34</sup> See Rones, 2015, p.279, for the rest of the interview.

<sup>35</sup> See Rones, 2015, p.280 for the rest of the interview.

are seen as a gang of girls, and that they are all just girls in the Medical Battalion”. This illustrates how men’s identity and claim to masculine status can be threatened by an increased proportion of women ; suddenly, they are one of the girls, and that seemed to create a need in the men in the Medical Battalion to get rid of the women.

The officers who had been involved in resolving this gender conflict could tell that the men tried to “psych out” the women in military training and outdoor activities. For instance, the men speeded up the pace in loading activities, or even worse when the platoon marched together to activities, just because they knew that it would cause some of the smallest women to be left behind. The men also made sure that they “nudged the women on the side” (called attention to it) when women were left behind or were not good enough in combat techniques, according to the men’s standard.

The researcher herself also observed how a man used a break to jump onto this or that woman’s back just to check whether they could carry him, clearly signalling who had passed the test. This was a very tall guy and he failed the smallest women since his feet were not off the ground. This illustrates how the men had the authority to define the standards and could use superior physical capacity to demonstrate to the women who was in the military for legitimate reasons and who was not (see Rones, 2015, pp. 207–209). As a consequence of the men’s nagging and disparaging comments on the women’s physical standards, the women gradually developed feelings of being a burden, that hampered and delayed the squad.

There was a lot of that stuff about us being so weak. We had to listen to many nasty comments that men are better leaders than women. Hearing such things all the time gradually made us feel like a burden to the squad. We felt that now we are hampering, and now we are delaying and: “sorry, sorry, sorry !”. It affected us quite a lot – we noticed that in the end we pulled back sometimes, because we felt much weaker than them (Female Medical NCO candidate).

This quote displays how the men’s overbearing techniques and ability to make a judgement on the women’s performance prompted the women to withdraw from male-dominated tasks with the feeling that they were “*in fact*” inferior to the men. This kind of withdrawal hindered the women from fully taking part in the training and developing their skills and confidence. With the women on the side lines, and speed made a defining standard of NCO or Medic performance, the men “confirmed” the traditional idea that women, and particularly the smallest ones, were unfit for military service and that they themselves were better leaders and medics than the women.

Thus, the men could tell the researcher several stories about how they had experienced women’s shortcomings themselves (see Rones, 2015, p. 207). The officers saw the situation differently, and opined these men were immature “young boys” (pp.207-208). Both first- and second-year candidates told how the tense situation between men and women had improved after the officers had got involved. Also, when the researcher was visiting the battalion to present this study’s findings, two of the female informants came over and told her that it had taken them a long time to regain their self-confidence. They

added that, if it had not been for the officers, they would have left the military with the belief that they were not capable of becoming medical squad leaders. This illustrates the importance of an involved, local leadership in a position and willing to use its authority to regulate relationships among trainees and define for them what is right and wrong, what is accepted and unacceptable, and who is a capable soldier.

### **Breaking Up Traditional Gender Roles and Developing Feelings of Equivalency in NORSOC's Gender-Segregated Training**

#### *Providing a Space for Skill Acquisition on the Opposite Gender's "Home-Court" by Gender-Segregated Training*

The case from the Medical Battalion might illustrate the broader trend, in which military women withdraw from "hard core" military activities and make defensive career "choices". A consequence is that most women serve in administrative and logistical positions within the support services (see Netland, 2013). Accordingly, when NORSOC needed women for special operations in which the soldier's gender matters,<sup>36</sup> there were very few women who were really skilled with weapons and had operational military training. This was part of the reason why NORSOC established the all-female SR Platoon as a trial project.

According to leaders in NORSOC, one purpose of the project was precisely to create an opportunity for women to take their place on an arena that is "ruled" by men, without the women being in competition with or overrun by men, as illustrated in the following quote:

The great idea of the project was to create an arena for the girls, where they should be allowed to blossom and compete on their own premises and not compete with the boys. That is what the Armed Forces have done, at least in the last 20-25-30 years ; they had the desire to increase the proportion of women, and then they put the girls in together with the boys, and that integration has been the policy all the time. But one might see that it does not work that well. The statistics show that [...] creating an arena where the girls can get a sense of achievement and where the first, second and third places actually go to girls... I think that is important – to create that arena, to create a sense of achievement and belief in oneself. In summary, I think that they are almost as good as the guys when they get that opportunity (Leader, NORSOC).

This solution, where the women were in one platoon and the men in another, also made it impossible to establish any gendered division of internal labour. Accordingly, women were not only *allowed* to get a space to develop skills on the men's home court; they were also *forced* to take the main responsibility for "men's tasks" themselves, not least when it comes to the maintenance and handling of weapons and vehicles. A clear

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<sup>36</sup> Operations where the soldiers' gender matters can be house or body search and interrogation in gender-segregated societies, as well as special reconnaissance and intelligence in populated areas. Moreover, NORSOC experienced a dearth of women when they were assigned to train and mentor female Afghans in the female component of the Afghan National Police Crisis Response Unit (ANP CRU) in Kabul.

difference from the Medical Battalion was, for instance, that women, not men, became the platoon's "weapons expert" and "vehicles expert" whom the other women asked for help, and who accordingly learned to solve problems independently.

However, the women had some training together with the men, and similarly to the way in which the women in the Medical Battalion withdrew themselves when they were in the men's arena, the women in the all-female SR Platoon registered that they stepped back and got less room to prove themselves when they were training with their male colleagues:

And then we had a patrol course with the guys and that was very good, too. But we can compete a bit tougher when we are only girls. I noticed that, when we were with the guys, they got all the space, kind of. And that annoyed me a bit. Just because they are boys, actually ! I noticed the girls went : "yes, but they are paratroopers, and we are only that and that and thadada..." and kind of let the guys take over ("Nora", the all-female SR Platoon).

The men in the PR Platoon also got the opportunity to develop skills in women's traditional domain without any women's correction. When asked if there were any differences in performance between the two platoons, a paratrooper almost proudly said: "*We are actually better than them at cleaning up*". The paratrooper's big smile and the word "actually" probably signify that it was not expected that the men should be better than the women in this task, and that he thought it was a bit cool to beat the women on their "home turf".

Moreover, several of the men said that the women were better than them when it came to planning missions, both on structure and in their focus on the details. They added that this encouraged them to "sharpen themselves up", since there was a bit of competition between the two platoons, which they believed made both the men and the women better. Also, unlike the men in the Medical Battalion, who classified the women's focus on accuracy and detail as something unnecessary and annoying, both the male conscripts and the NORSOC instructors highlighted the women's accuracy and attention to detail as strengths, and something important that the men could and should learn from.

The NORSOC leaders and instructors explained that gender-segregated training gave trainees the chance to draw the benefits from the two genders' complementary strengths, without them hindering each other's development through their weaknesses:

So instead of pulling each other down, we have them separated and we get to lift the level in both gangs. Then the men get as good as they can become, and the women get as good as they can become (Instructor, NORSOC).

The subtext in this quote was the fear that the women would hamper the men's development in physically demanding tasks; yet the findings from the Medical Battalion showed that the men and women often pulled each other down through their strengths, rather than their weaknesses. In any event, it seems that the gender-segregated model gave both genders the opportunity to develop their skills and confidence across the whole spectrum of the platoon's tasks, without them being pulled down or overrun by the

opposite gender. This resulted in the women in the all-female SR Platoon becoming highly skilled in “hard core” (hitherto male) military tasks.

### *A Positive Narrative about Women’s Military Performance*

While the men in the Medical Battalion harassed their female colleagues and complained that they struggled to carry their backpacks, handle their weapons and shoot safely (see Rones, 2015, p.207), the men in the PR Platoon seemed to be friendly towards and very impressed about their female colleagues. They talked about them as capable, highly skilled, “*very, very physically fit*” and even better than the men on weapon safety and marksmanship precision. The last point was also emphasized by the NORSOC leaders and instructors :

But the girls are better than the guys on other things [than physical strength], such as precision shooting, for example (Instructor, NORSOC).

Instead of wanting to “psych out” or get rid of the women, the paratroopers, who had seen and heard of the women’s good performance in camp, were also positive about being together with the women outside in the field:

We haven’t been much together with them. But we have seen that when they work on planning missions, they are neat. They write and draw and are very good. Better than us. Some more sketches and so on. There they are good, really good. But beyond that I have no experience. It would have been fun to be a bit more with them out in the field. I think they are good there too (“Elias”, PR Platoon).

This quote illustrates how these men had also developed a belief in the women’s performance in an arena where they hadn’t seen them in action themselves. Thus, it can be argued that NORSOC develops a positive narrative on women’s performance and potential and that the findings are in line with Anthony King’s (2013, 2015) findings that women can be respected and accepted in the military’s inner sanctum if they can perform their military role with competence and professionalism. The women’s good performance challenged the men a bit, but for the most part it seemed to create a healthy competition that motivated the men to improve themselves:

Every time we hear that some of them [women] have shot a great sniper test, that is of course motivation for us. We cannot be beaten by a girl and we joke a bit about that. So that’s good for us, actually.

**Interviewer** : Is it bad to be beaten by a girl?

**Paratrooper** : Yes, it is. Or – that is what you are taught, in a way. But it’s hard to get upset about it. It’s really just another soldier [...].

**Interviewer** : You said that you have been taught that it is bad to be beaten by a girl ?

**Paratrooper** : Yes, I was thinking of it as a society issue, something that we become indoctrinated with when we are small.

In accordance with the case from the Medical Battalion, this quote illustrates explicitly how the soldiers enter the military with “indoctrinated” expectations of gender and gender roles from civil society. However, it seems that NORSOC challenged some of the soldiers’ civilian-indoctrinated presumptions about the value of women in the military :

I remember, before I left [home] I was a bit sceptical about the all-female SR Platoon. I did not understand why they would get the money to become recons. Because I thought that, anyway, a man will be stronger and faster in war. So why make a special thing for the women ? But now that I’ve come in, I’ve seen the value of it. They are incredibly good, these women, and good at lifting and carrying and walking. Having women in certain situations, in NORSOC, I think that’s of great value in fact (“Andreas”, PR Platoon).

### *Equal Status with No Threat to the Men’s Core Identity*

However, the quotes above indicate also that the paratrooper’s self-confidence, identity and position were not threatened by the women in a way that got them upset “for real”. The core identity in the PR Platoon seemed to cohere around the ability to carry a heavy backpack over long distances at a certain pace and, despite the women’s good performance, this task was still one where the men outperformed the women:

The only place I think maybe many of us [guys] have a small advantage is on the physical “walk-a-long-way-and-carry-very-heavy-things”. On the rest of the points we are the same (“Henrik”, PR Platoon).

If the women had beaten the men in this particular task, the harmonious situation between the men and women could have been challenged:

There is a woman who leaves all the men behind in swimming [...] In swimming, it is fine, because I have never trained for that. And if a 40-kilo girl can do more hang ups, then it’s fine. But if I had been beaten in a speed march, then I would have been grumpy.

**Interviewer** : So, you hope they are not becoming as good as you are in that?

**Paratrooper** : That's what we are supposed to be good at, then. I could not have handled that.

**Interviewer** : You could not have borne that ?

**Paratrooper** : No, that would have been difficult.

The women had not, however, been selected to beat the men or become the men’s equal in this “identity-defining” task. “*If we had needed more people to carry a heavy backpack over a mountain plateau, we would have taken in more men*”, said one of the leaders, and explained that the all-female SR Platoon was a result of their need to select and train “*the best women*” for special operations in urban areas. This paved the way for slightly different selection criteria for the women, as well as two different specialization periods in which the men specialized in long distance (wilderness) reconnaissance and the women in urban reconnaissance.

The gender segregation and these differences could have created a feeling of inequality, and the women, who had experience of this from sport, had expected that they would be treated as a B-team. For instance, they had seen that a women's soccer team were assigned a poorly lit gravel pitch while the men's football team was provided with a modern indoor pitch. Thus, the women were almost overwhelmed and impressed that NORSOC had provided the all-female SR Platoon with as good instructors, equipment, training facilities and priority as they provided for the men. In addition, both the men and the women experienced the women's specialization period as a bit more exciting than the men's, and the all-female SR Platoon got a lot of attention from the media and researchers. One of the female recons said therefore: *"If there is any B-team it must be the paratroopers, who are almost overshadowed by us"*. The leaders/ instructors said it was not good if the all-female SR Platoon got too much attention, since this could cause a challenge for the men, and tried to regulate outside access to the women. It can thus be suggested that the NORSOC leadership strived to establish an equal, yet different, status for the two platoons, which according to Pettigrew's (1998) contact hypothesis is important for establishing a good relationship between groups. This seems to have created a feeling of equivalency, which is apparent in the quote from a paratrooper saying: *"I believe this is two A-teams with different responsibilities"*.

The establishment of the all-female SR Platoon as a "twin-platoon" ranked pari passu with the PR Platoon, at least internally among the conscripts, did not challenge the paratroopers' elite status as "the best men", or "the selected few". There was no question of the selection criteria being lowered for them. On the contrary, the need to establish a dedicated "A-platoon" for "the best women" served to confirm the assumption that no women would be able to manage the physical hardship required of a paratrooper :

Women are allowed to apply to the PR Platoon. But nobody can do it. It gets too heavy [...]. They do not have a chance, it will become too heavy ("Rune", PR Platoon).

Elite status also made the NORSOC case different from the Medical Battalion's. Whereas several actors in the latter felt that their battalion had become a victim of a political correctness that had been considered more important than the quality of personnel, thus reinforcing its already poor status (as a lesser support branch nicknamed the "girly battalion"), NORSOC enjoyed both autonomy and a high status, which enabled them to classify the women as important and needed for special operations, while at the same time retaining their elite status. Drawing upon Bourdieu (2000) again, we can say that NORSOC is in a position in which they have the authority to define what and who is important, which the Medical Battalion did not have. As one of the all-female SR Platoon initiators interviewed by Kristoffersen (2017) said : *"The symbol effect coming from the fact that it is NORSOC who does this, is also huge"* (p.3), but the actual ripple or spill-over effects of the all-female SR Platoon remain to be investigated.

## Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this article was to challenge the claim of previous mixed-room studies that an all-encompassing gender-mixed coexistence has a de-gendering effect caused almost exclusively by close exposure to the opposite gender.

The study has shown that the participation of the two genders in a multi-task institution with “total” characteristics (Goffman, 1961) such as the Armed Forces, can generate a gendered division of labour at both meso- and micro-levels. This can happen in particular if it is left to self-organize or is marked by poor (pedagogical) leadership that does not address tacit gender-role expectations and gendered systems of recognition.

This should be a matter of concern for at least two reasons. Firstly, at the meso-level it can create “female branches” as in the Medical Battalion’s case, conducive to the assumption that personnel requirements are less important in such a branch than in others. This was reflected in the idea that it was a good place to dump personnel one had to have for political reasons, but whose ability to live up to the requirements of higher-status branches was in doubt.

Secondly, at the micro-level it can hinder both men’s and women’s skill acquisition and the opportunity to develop full confidence in tasks where the opposite gender has the authority to set the standard and make the judgments that count. We have seen that this laid the foundation for a gendered power struggle, and contributed to harassment and experience-based anecdotes that “confirmed” for both the men and the women that women were not capable of performing military tasks.

Furthermore, the article has shown how a gender-segregated training programme both allowed and “forced” women to acquire skills in “hard core” military (hitherto male) tasks without being overrun by men, and at the same time encouraged the men to improve themselves in tasks which women performed better. This reinforced and unhindered skill acquisition process contributed to experience-based stories of women as highly capable and militarily skilled, adding new strengths to the unit.

An important prerequisite for the success of gender-segregated training, however, was that it be managed by a competent and involved leadership using their authority to highlight the women’s strengths (e.g., focus on details) as functionally needed. Moreover, the leadership provided the two single-sex platoons with equal resources and an equal feeling of priority, and thus equal status.

Accordingly, this author’s claim is that a time-limited segregation in single-sex training-groups can be a fruitful pedagogical method for providing men and women access to real skill acquisition in areas that are dominated by the opposite gender, and thus for breaking up traditional men’s and women’s roles. Introducing all-encompassing gender-mixed groups as a structural treatment without addressing culturally acquired gendered role expectations carries the risk of establishing “married-life” relations, with a restraining and perhaps permanent job segregation that do not exist in the all-male forces, as well as requests for “divorce”.

However, this does not mean that the “exposure thesis” of the previous mixed-rooms studies should be fully abandoned. While it can be argued that NORSOC was able to revise the traditional negative narrative of women in the military precisely because the unit became exposed to women, an important prerequisite for the changed narrative was that they be exposed to capable women who were enabled to become highly skilled and confident soldiers. The problem with the “exposure thesis” and the claimed effects of gender-mixed rooms is thus not that they are wrong but that they do not *always* apply. For example, this article has shown that all-encompassing gender coexistence can just as easily serve to confirm negative prejudices towards women as to change them, and that providing both men and women with high-quality and unhindered skill acquisition across the entire spectrum of a unit’s tasks seems to be better for raising the role and status of women in the military than requiring them to sleep in mixed rooms.

Yet mixed rooms can have many positive effects, in particular regarding team integration in places where “team-living” is practised, as other studies have shown. The yearly conscript survey (Norwegian Armed Forces, 2017) found that 94 percent of women and 80 percent of men who live in mixed-gender rooms (N= 1574) are positively minded about this experience, while only 2 percent of women and 7 percent of men harbour negative opinions about it. However, this tells us nothing about the de-gendering effects of mixed rooms and can divert attention from issues that do not necessarily affect soldiers’ well-being, such as internally accepted sexism, or a gendered job segregation that can be comfortable and “effective” for soldiers. Interestingly, this was the excuse that the Medical Battalions NCO candidates used for sticking to the “fixed” roles that restrained their full skill development.

Finally, it should be mentioned that this study has been exploratory and has limitations that provide opportunities for future research. Firstly, the narrative of women as highly capable and important for military special operations found in the NORSOC case study is not necessarily transferable to the rest of the Armed Forces. For instance, King (2015) notes that sometimes women can be denigrated precisely because they are highly able and, therefore, threatening to male soldiers. Similarly, several actors in NORSOC said that they had to defend the female recons’ selection and position to outsiders who argued that the females had been admitted and prioritized for special forces training at the cost of “better men”. Moreover, some of the women who had formed the first all-female SR Platoon cohort experienced being perceived as cocky, swollen-headed, arrogant, and smarty-pants in their subsequent service in the regular forces, as a result of their perfectionism about skills, their high standards and not least the NORSOC status that was visible from the symbols on their uniform. Such perceptions certainly provide social scientists with a research topic of prime interest for the future.

Secondly, relationships *among* military women needs further attention. *The Northern Brigade Study* failed to generate data on the effects of mixed-rooms on female soldiers. Hellum (2014, 2016) and Lilleaas and Ellingsen (2014) quote several men and women who believe that having many women in one place leads only to the forming of cliques, girly gossiping and drama, and argues that mixed rooms reduce these tendencies. It remains to

be ascertained, however, whether women's alleged tendency towards drama is a biological given or just a work-life discourse that keeps recurring in informant quotes.

Another factor that can help explain why the Medical Battalion deviated negatively from the NORSOC's gender-segregated training, but also from the other positive cases,<sup>37</sup> is that all but the Medical Battalion case started as self-initiated trial projects. Thus, apart from a possible "Hawthorne effect", it is likely that the positive cases became so because the leadership concerned really wanted to make their radical ideas on female integration a success. In sum, these cases illustrate how leaders, if they want to do this, can use their authority to regulate dysfunctional relationships between groups of soldiers, classify women as wanted and important, and produce a positive narrative on women in their unit.

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<sup>37</sup> See Lilleaas & Ellingsen's (2014) and Hellum's (2016) studies on respectively Border Guards' mixed rooms and the Air and Missile Defence Battalion's 50/50 project.

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