

Organizational resistance through organizing principles: the case of gender equality in the military

Gender
equality in the
military

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Abstract

Purpose – Previous studies show that the implementation of gender equality encounters resistance in military organizations, but it is often invisible or seen as confined to anonymous structures or troubled individuals. This paper aims to show how the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) use organizational principles to resist implementing gender equality measures.

Design/methodology/approach – The study is a qualitative analysis of discursive strategies in the SAF's 2013–2018 annual reports to government.

Findings – The organizing principles of instrumentality and distance, while existing in parallel with gender equality efforts, actually pursue logics that prevents the SAF from implementing gender equality. The principle of instrumentality in this context means that gender equality in the SAF is of secondary interest to organizational members. The principle of distancing from the problem includes strategies that alienate female from male officers.

Originality/value – The contribution of this paper is the finding that the use of organizing principles represents conscious organizational resistance to gender equality efforts. This kind of use needs to be revealed and criticized to change military organizations.

Keywords Organizational resistance, Discursive strategies, Gender equality, Organizing principle, Military organization

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This article offers a theoretical analysis of how organizing principles are used as discursive legitimization strategies for organizational resistance to gender equality. Through the principles of instrumentality and distance, which are adapted into discursive strategies, gender equality is effectively hindered from gaining ground in a military organization, here the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF). At the same time, the SAF maintain that they are working toward gender equality goals. This finding adds to previous research on how resistance toward gender equality materializes. Previous literature has directly or indirectly largely

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attributed opposition in organizations either to anonymous structures or to the individuals within them. There have been calls to address organizational resistance in unsuccessful cases of implementation of gender equality (Bergqvist *et al.*, 2013; Lombardo and Mergaert, 2013). However, organizational resistance has been difficult to detect, as it is often passive and discursive (Vaara *et al.*, 2006; Erkama, 2010; Ylöstalo, 2016). Through the concept of organizing principles, we show how organizations produce frameworks and discursive strategies that function as organizational resistance. Organizing principles can be defined as: “[. . .] the logic by which work is coordinated and information is gathered, disseminated, and processed within and between organizations” (McEvily *et al.*, 2003, p. 92).

The organization in focus here is the military. Normative transformations such as value changes are the most challenging for military organizations to manage (Holmberg and Alvinus, 2019). Resistance in military organizations is, however, often conceptualized or understood as individual, more or less hidden, expressions of rejection toward change (Bergström *et al.*, 2014). In search of organizational resistance, we explore the discursive legitimization strategies of the SAF in relation to gender equality. The SAF is an umbrella organization that covers army, air force and navy. Military organizations have often been found to be highly gendered, with some authors attributing this to their bureaucratic, hierarchical nature (Addelston and Stirratt, 1996; Hearn, 2011), their traditional view of merit (Soeters *et al.*, 2006) and even to their narcissistic and greedy tendencies (Abrahamsson, 1972; Coser, 1974). The entry of women into the military, as well as political and societal demands for gender equality, have meant that resistance to these “new” norms is increasing (Holyfield *et al.*, 2017; Muhr and Slok-Andersen, 2017). Men are privileged in the military and military organizations can be expected to hinder gender equality work, because for the privileged, gender issues are invisible, and therefore, ignored (Linehagen, 2018; Kimmel and Ferber, 2018; Linehagen and Wester, 2023).

The situation for women in the military organization is extremely difficult (Morris, 1996; Turchik and Wilson, 2010). Women’s performances are often interpreted as less valuable, meaningful and less efficient than men’s. Different qualities are attributed to men and women, and this affects how their potential and competence are evaluated (Sasson-Levy, 2003). The issues vary from poorly fitted uniforms (Linehagen, 2018) to sexual harassment and rape (Morris, 1996). Research on gender and the military usually focuses on either structures and gendered cultures or individual psychology (Miller, 1997; Wood and Toppelberg, 2017). Organizational strategies of the military are studied in the search for “best practices” (Buchanan *et al.*, 2014; Heinecken, 2017). However, less research is directed toward examining how the military facilitates sexual harassment and inequality. Here, Bonnes (2017) has made an important contribution in explaining how bureaucracies work in supporting sexual harassment at the local level. Building on Bonnes (2017) insights, we move toward the strategic level and further explore how resistance works within military organizations.

Organizing principles

The production of discursive strategies can be a conscious act of resistance. Organizations are groups of people purposefully arranged to achieve one or several shared goals. The groups carry responsibility, culture and identity, in which the whole is more than the sum of the parts (Ahne and Papakostas, 2002). What characterizes organizations is the high amount of communication, interaction and interplay among humans. This interaction takes form according to different conscious logics – what we call organizing principles. Communicated through discursive strategies, these logics can be used for organizational resistance to external pressure for change.

The concept of organizing principles is key to understanding organizational dynamics (Thomas *et al.*, 2014). Each organization has goals and objectives that are achieved through organizing principles, which guide organizational behavior (Ouchi, 1980). For instance, hierarchy, division of responsibility and depersonalization are organizing principles of bureaucratic organizations (Weber, 1946). Generally, an organizing principle is understood to be a guiding idea, a regime or a commitment that aims to rank, classify and facilitate social as well as organizational processes, and to steer them in a particular direction. At a societal level, examples of organizing principles are age, sex (Krekula, 2018), creed and the market (McEvily *et al.*, 2003). At the organizational level, we also find emotional management (Hochschild, 1983) and policies concerning for instance sustainability (Dresner, 2012). Emotion management is about handling and controlling emotions in the workplace. It is the organization that sets norms and rules for what is deemed acceptable to feel and display outwardly. By controlling employees' emotions, organizations predetermine how emotions become part of the organizing principles within the organization. Organizing principles are both relational and symbolic tools in defending the organization's culture, norms and values (Wilhoit and Kisselburgh, 2019). Theoretically, the organizational principles present in the specific organization will manage any challenge (such as pressures to implement gender equality) that it confronts. In fact, organizational principles may become mechanisms of organizational resistance to certain changes. Gender equality work can be seen as a technology of power (Woehl, 2011) because it necessitates changes in the organization and steers decisions, recruitment and salary levels while simultaneously bringing inequalities to light (Ylöstalo, 2016). Gender equality work can therefore be expected to clash with existing organizing principles, particularly in military organizations.

Resistance to gender equality

Despite efforts at creating an equal working life, men continue to be positioned above women in many areas (Pesonen *et al.*, 2009). The logic of informal resistance is widespread in organizations (Prasad and Prasad, 2000), but so far, it has largely been theorized as individual opposition. Change management practitioners such as those trying to implement gender equality more often than not encounter opposition and organizational inertia – that could be conceptualized as informal resistance (Ahrne and Papakostas, 2002; Powell *et al.*, 2018). Resistance to change arises when cultural and organizational values, traditions, ideologies and customs are confronted and challenged as well as when certain members of the organization lose power, influence, control and competence relative to other groups (Ahrne and Papakostas, 2002; Powell *et al.*, 2018). Previous research has argued that the effectiveness or “business case”-argument, which says that an increased presence of women helps the organization meet its goals, may be more successful than moral arguments (Egnell *et al.*, 2014). In this paper, however, we focus on the military as a public authority, which is subject to equality and nondiscrimination legislation, and must, therefore, conform to gender equality goals for reasons unrelated to business case or effectiveness arguments.

Ylöstalo (2016) notes that resistance toward gender equality in organizations usually takes a passive form. This makes it difficult to address and could be an important reason for the inability of political efforts to transform military organizations – organizational resistance is often subtly produced through discursive strategies, and so has been unnoticed and therefore unchallenged. Organizations produce frameworks and discursive strategies that affect their members. As collective entities, they can resist normative transformation processes through descriptions that create paradoxes or legitimize policy paths, which conflict with political goals (Pesonen *et al.*, 2009; Trenchera *et al.*, 2019). Vaara *et al.* (2006, p. 790) identified five core recurring elements in the legitimating discourse they studied:

“(1) normalization, (2) authorization, (3) rationalization, (4) moralization, and (5) narrativization”. The first element states what is seen as normal behavior, the second authorizes claims, the third and fourth provide rationales and moral arguments for claims and the fifth sets out a story. While [Vaara et al. \(2006\)](#) analyzed discursive legitimation strategies in an organizational context, their framework also facilitates an analysis of how discursive strategies are used as tools for organizational resistance.

Analyzing discursive strategies is important in the study of resistance and reveals that texts are not simply innocent descriptions ([Wreder, 2005](#)). Discourses are expressed through different forms of social practice ([Fairclough, 2005](#)). This means that the organizational documents express a form of organizational (social) practice – the production of certain discursive strategies that can be interpreted as resistance against gender equality ([Powell et al., 2018](#)). The present analysis aims to reveal the organization’s underlying logics (its organizing principles). However, to fully understand these organizing principles, we need to acknowledge that they are operating in opposition to other principles. [Dick \(2008\)](#) claims that constant struggles are going on between conflicting fields. In the context of this study, the logic of the armed forces can be seen as one field that is being opposed by the political logic of the gender equality field.

Methods

We have chosen to study organizational resistance through official documents produced by the SAF. Organizing principles can be found in the discursive strategies of the organization that are supported by the highest strategic leadership. Following the identification of relevant empirical material, the process of analyzing these began. The starting point of our discourse analysis is the critical theoretical component of the feminist analysis of gender and organizations. It aims at critically analyzing the military organization and the power relations at work both within it and between the organization and its surroundings. As noted by [Jaipal-Jamani \(2014\)](#), the discourse analysis is enhanced when the analyst can show the role of language in this process. But we also draw on our extensive knowledge of the military organization and its social codes and language conventions, which is a second form of validation that relies on semiotics ([Jaipal-Jamani, 2014](#)). Together, we read and reread the texts several times to identify how the organization’s discursive strategies regarding gender equality manifested themselves. Through a careful analysis of the language and the relationship between related sentences and paragraphs, we interpreted the presence of organizational principles in the text aiming for inter-researcher reliability. No code-trees were used for visualization, but comments were made in the documents, marking our interpretations.

The first step in this analysis consisted of reading through and selecting quotes that had some connection to the purpose of the study. An example of a quote is given below:

The Swedish Armed Forces identify several areas of development in relation to this [the problem of too few women]: clearer strategic guidance and direction for attracting and retaining more women; coordinating projects and initiatives for attracting and recruiting women; continued integration of equality perspectives; career opportunities through coaching and mentoring ([Swedish Armed Forces 2014, Appendix 2, p. 40](#)).

The second step in the analysis consisted of evaluating and categorizing quotes with similar content through discussion and the iterative process of going back and forth between themes and quotes. In this case, the quote was sorted under the theme *Resistance through the Organizing Principle of Distancing*. We found that in the quote, the focus is on women as the problem and strategies contribute to the stereotyping and distancing of women

within the organization. In the same way, all selected quotes were treated. Finally, these interpretations were analytically sorted into two main themes:

- (1) the organizing principle of instrumentality; and
- (2) the organizing principle of distancing.

These identified organizational principles were able to include about four different discursive strategies each, as described in the results section. No interpretation were left hanging in need of an additional theme.

The empirical material used is the annual reports produced by the SAF to the Swedish Government. We studied closely the reports issued between 2013 and 2018 (in total 1,302 pages, 726 pages of main documents and 576 pages of appendix). The annual reports are generated through internal work that takes at least a couple of months as all parts of the organization report to the leadership on how they have pursued their work. It could thus be argued that the annual reports are a mix of bottom-up and top-down perspectives, both regulated by the organizing principles of the armed forces. Central elements are then chosen by the leadership to represent a reasonable picture of the organization's activities. We argue that organizational resistance is explicit in the annual reports of the SAF and that this message is directed as much to an internal audience (members of the military organization) as to an external audience (the government).

The government may also single out particular areas of interest on which the organization is specifically obliged to report. Personnel issues and equality have been specified as such areas for several years. This pressure from the political level has been relatively stable during the years studied, perhaps a slight increase in recent years (Holmberg and Nilsson, 2018). The pressure seems to be unaffected by changes in the military's tasks (decreased focus on international missions) and the changes with respect to conscription (see below) – it seems rather to reflect societal and political changes at a more abstract level, as is described in the section on context below.

While the empirical material is representative, it also has limitations. Official documents, in particular those that are important and can be expected to be scrutinized by the public for years to come, most likely have been “washed” and revised several times to present a politically correct view of the workings of the organization and to conceal difficulties or internal conflict. In this sense, one might think that annual reports are the least likely place to find explicit organizational resistance. However, if we can identify resistance in the empirical material chosen, it is hard to explain it as a mistake, given the thorough checking process that annual reports receive. Nevertheless, we recognize that the picture of organizational resistance that is presented based on the empirical material in this article is not the full picture.

The annual reports (in Swedish) were collected from the SAF homepage, in the form of PDF files (www.forsvarsmakten.se/sv/om-forsvarsmakten/dokument/arsredovisningar/). These were scanned using the search words: gender equality, equality, women, gender and integration. The parts of the documents that contained texts on these issues were copied into a Word document for further analysis. The final Word document with relevant parts of text from the five years studied ended up being about 30 pages. The data is available only in Swedish, and the citations used in the results section were translated by the authors.

The context

Swedish security policy during the Cold War was characterized by a balancing act between the superpowers. During this time, the military organization had a central position in Swedish society. The purpose of the Swedish military is territorial defense, but it can also

assist civilian society during crises. During the 1990s and 2000s, undertaking international missions was also a key task, which has, however, diminished since 2014 (Holmberg, 2015).

The Armed Forces, as one of Sweden's largest authorities, is also one of the most gender-segregated (Linehagen, 2018). However, since the beginning of the 20th century, women have been employed in various voluntary positions. Women could choose to become conscripts voluntarily and some women did become military officers. It would take until 1980 for women to be allowed to apply for selected military positions and from 1989 onward, there have been no formal obstacles to women occupying any position in the organization (Linehagen, 2018). In 2010, conscription was abandoned in favor of an all-volunteer force. However, recruitment was difficult and conscription reemerged in 2018, this time including both men and women. In 2018, female conscripts constituted 15.5% of the total 3,700 conscripts. According to the latest statistics from the SAF (2021), 22% of all employees including civilian employees are women. Among professional officers, 9% are women. Continuously serving group commanders, soldiers and sailors comprise 15% women.

Since the early 2000s, state authorities have had a strong focus on equal opportunities and nondiscrimination, and the armed forces have felt the pressure to comply with laws and regulations (Holmberg and Nilsson, 2018). In 2009, the Discrimination Act entered into force. The Act protects from discrimination due to gender, transgender identity or expression, ethnicity, religion or other beliefs, disability, sexual preference or age (Discrimination Act, 2008). Swedish authorities must comply with this act. The political pressure was strong, as the previous Swedish Government (in office until 2022) had declared itself the first feminist government in the world (Swedish Government, 2018) and the country is internationally recognized for pursuing progressive policies promoting gender equality (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2017). Despite this seemingly progressive society and political order, gender equality efforts in Sweden are both opposed and contested (Strid, 2018).

Empirical analysis

As noted earlier, two organizing principles emerged in the discourses of the military organization, both of which express organizational resistance:

- (1) *The organizing principle of instrumentality* works through discursive strategies that authorize the primacy of the goal and organizational efficacy (normalizes organizational narcissism, deprioritizes rights-based equality work and offer rationalizations for inaction). The principle of instrumentality in this context means that gender equality in the SAF is of secondary interest for organizational members. The primary task is training combat, training to kill other people and other dehumanizing strategies.
- (2) *The organizing principle of distancing from the problem* (for instance, through othering), finding solutions that do not match the problem, symbolic actions and discursive strategies that rationalize the issue as being of external origin (implicitly authorizing reluctance in problem recognition). The principle of distancing from the problem include strategies that alienate female from male officers by framing female members of the organization as physically weaker, and therefore, deviant.

We do not find any examples of moralization.

Resistance through the organizing principle of instrumentality

A prominent feature in the discourse regarding equality work in the Swedish military is the "three perspectives", or reasons for dealing with equality. These run through the annual

reports of the whole period studied. However, it is clear that the third perspective, which is instrumental and focuses on effectiveness, is the one that dominates the discourse:

Our leadership has identified three perspectives regarding the issue of increasing the share of women in the organization [The SAF]. The rights-based perspective – [gives women the] opportunity to participate and affect society, to have access to power and influence; an attractive employer – [gives the SAF] opportunity to reach all of the population; Operational effect – mixed groups/women are necessary in operations in order to achieve an increased operational effect (Swedish Armed Forces 2013, Appendix 2, p. 46).

By choosing to focus on the third perspective, which perceives equality as a question of instrumentality, the Swedish military is able to rationalize women's presence in the organization and limit the loss of power that the rights-based perspective would imply for its main organizing principle. The organization is also able to authorize its focus on military goals, which are important for the socialization processes within the organization. This way, the discursive strategy diverts attention from the political discourse on gender equality.

The political focus on gender equality and nondiscrimination has increased during the period studied, and the Swedish military has to deal with government requirements in this respect. One initiative referred to below is to join other state authorities in a program aimed at developing gender equality:

The Swedish Armed Forces have chosen to be one of 18 state authorities that participate in the program Gender Integration in State Authorities (JiM), which will develop the organization's gender perspective, which in the long term creates opportunities for improving the psychosocial work environment and non-discriminatory approaches. This in turn contributes to maintaining competence irrespective of sex (Swedish Armed Forces, 2013, Appendix 2, p. 46).

In the description of this collaboration, two elements of resistance may be noted. First, the Swedish military describes the positive effects that will happen *in time*, referring to improved psychosocial work environment and nondiscriminatory treatment. What is said is thus that a deficient psychosocial work environment and discriminatory treatment are acceptable right now – it is normalized while opportunities for limiting it may appear in the future. This is a discursive strategy to point out that the issue of equality is not prioritized right now. It can also be associated with distancing – which will be further exemplified below.

Second, rationalizing that the aim of the exercise is to contribute to retaining competence, the final sentence in the citation above reduces the initiative to the organizing principle of instrumentality. The discursive strategy emphasizes the instrumentality and authority of the military organization, demonstrating which principle is the most important. It is an example of what [Vaara et al. \(2006\)](#) terms rationalization. In addition, it is a clear example of the third element of the SAF's approach to gender equality – regarding effectiveness – becoming normalized. Implicitly, the discursive strategy makes the gender equality aspect of the program less important. Here, the SAF manage to contest the hegemonic discourse of gender equality (compare [Trenchera et al., 2019](#)).

Equality work in the Swedish military is set in a bureaucratic structure that focuses very much on form, hierarchy, decisions and leadership rather than substance. The following citation is an example of this:

The Swedish Armed Forces has identified two areas for development in its work on non-discrimination and equality: improved reporting [...] and a clearer link between the issues concerning [the systematic work on] work-environment and non-discrimination and equality efforts (Swedish Armed Forces, 2014, Appendix 2, p. 43).

This focus facilitates instrumentality as an organizing principle. In this way, rights-based equality issues and the values associated with this approach are hindered from gaining a central role. Gender equality in the work of the SAF remains a question of numbers and formality which do not interfere with the key rationale of the military. In the words of Ylöstalo (2016), it becomes passive. This focus allows the Swedish military to continue to limit equality work to people at lower levels, for instance, by directing lower levels to establish an action plan for equality work and the designation of a contact person (Swedish Armed Forces, 2013, Appendix 2, p. 46). In this way, the discursive signal of authorization toward the organization is clear: equality work is a question of formality, which requires only symbolic action.

Lack of women is described not as a problem for the women themselves (the rights-based perspective) but for the military organization. It is a risk for the personnel supply of the armed forces:

The number of women in the military personnel groups is far from what the Swedish Armed Forces is aiming at. The inflow and outflow from the basic military training suggest, in combination with the recently conducted study of women's views on the duty to serve and the design of the new military basic training, that the risks for the personnel supply are substantial. The Swedish Armed Forces are also taking action to avert these risks (Swedish Armed Forces, 2015, p. 87).

This is an example that shows that in 2015, the organizing principle of instrumentality is dominating the discursive strategy regarding equality work in the SAF. At the same time, in 2015, a change may be noted, where it is increasingly recognized that the problem is related to values (as compared to numbers and formalities). We will return to this observation in the next section.

Gender equality is recommended to be implemented only when it is relevant. For instance:

Through gender integration of the Swedish planning- and leadership method (SPL), opportunities are created for observing a gender perspective in defense planning, wherever it is relevant. (Swedish Armed Forces, 2018, p. 30).

This is a typical form of resistance through the organizing principle of instrumentality, facilitated by a discursive rationalization in relation to the priority of gender equality. Another common way of managing gender equality, illustrated below, is by relating it to the interests of either the government or the SAF's tasks of defending Sweden – both instrumental rather than focused on women's rights:

[...] The equality work that concerns personnel supply processes contributes primarily to the government's goal concerning the equal distribution of power and influence including equal education. The Swedish Armed Forces' measures in relation to equality are also tasked to support other strategic directives within the personnel supply, which contribute to the Swedish Armed Forces' ability to solve its task to defend Sweden and achieve a high operational effect. (Swedish Armed Forces, 2018, p. 72).

A key citation from 2018 under the heading, "the supreme commander's comments" effectively captures the discursive strategy:

[...] At the same time, there is discrimination, harassment and other unwelcome behaviors. Therefore, continued active work is necessary in order to counter these [behaviors]. Everyone should feel welcome in the Swedish Armed Forces. An equal defense is a stronger defense. (Swedish Armed Forces, 2018, p. 1).

In the opening section of the 2018 annual report, the Supreme Commander of the SAF comments on the presence of harassment and states that everyone should be welcome in the SAF. In the next sentence, the focus on the individual is reduced to organizational interest and instrumentality – as equality is said to be in the interest of the military organization because it “makes the defense stronger”. This is interpreted as resistance toward the individual, rights-based perspective through the organizing principle of instrumentality.

Still, in 2018, it is clear that the government is challenging the SAF’s use of instrumentality as an organizing principle. It has ordered the military organization to assess the suitability of the requirements for admission into the military forces from an equality perspective – and in light of the changing nature of warfare in an era of technological development:

The Swedish Armed Forces have, in the Regulation (2007:1266) with instruction for the Swedish Armed Forces, been tasked to integrate an equality perspective in their activities [...] The Swedish Armed Forces have also been tasked to conduct a review of admission criteria and position demands with support from the recruitment authority so that they are relevant from an equality perspective given today’s conditions. (Swedish Armed Forces, 2018, Appendix 1, pp. 15-16).

This suggests that the government – in a clear power conflict between the civilian and military fields – is challenging the instrumentality of the SAF’s admission criteria in the face of the shared goal of increasing recruitment to the military.

Resistance through the organizing principle of distancing

Temporality appears frequently in relation to the discourse on equality in the military. As noted above, it is used to normalize the presence of inequality in the present as the focus is directed at the length of the education instead. The following is an example of time being used to prevaricate about the military’s adaptation to norms of equality: “[...] it takes a long time to conduct value changes that have their origin in both the organization and the society at large” (Swedish Armed Forces, 2013, p. 46; compare also Swedish Armed Forces, 2014, Appendix 2, p. 40). Distancing is used here as an organizing principle that rationalizes and authorizes inaction, which we interpret as organizational resistance. It is close to the strategy of passive resistance (Ylöstalo, 2016).

The SAF struggle with managing the low number of women in the organization:

The Swedish Armed Forces identify several areas of development in relation to this [the problem of too few women]: clearer strategic guidance and direction for attracting and retaining more women; coordinating projects and initiatives for attracting and recruiting women; continued integration of equality perspectives; career opportunities through coaching and mentoring. (Swedish Armed Forces, 2014, Appendix 2, p. 40).

It is clear that women are a challenge, and the solutions suggested above strengthen the impression that the challenge is managed through a distancing of women and a reluctance to recognize the need for value changes. The problem of (missing) values and norms in the military is rationalized toward the women, who become the problem – instead of the organization itself and the norms it represents. It is the women who need to become more attracted by the military, not the military that need to become more attractive to women. Men are normalized who also normalizes norms and practices in the armed forces through the discursive strategy (compare Vaara *et al.*, 2006; Hearn, 2011; Kimmel and Ferber, 2018). The inability to deal with the “real problem” is even recognized in the 2015 annual report, which states: “Without an understanding of diverse prerequisites, driving forces, workplace structures, work environment and equipment-related issues that affect women and men differently, the work toward gender equality will move slowly” (Swedish Armed Forces, 2015, Appendix 2, p. 39). Despite this awareness – which may, however, have been temporary during the years 2015–2016

(no additional texts similar to the citation above has been found in the texts studied neither before nor after) – the distancing toward equality work continues. At this time, the keyword “systematic” is introduced. This is most likely associated with the political discourse in national directives regarding equality work:

[...] The purpose is to guarantee systematic work on gender integration within the production output [soldiers, exercises and military operations]. The tasks that have been prioritized have aimed at promoting equal prerequisites and development opportunities for co-workers, irrespective of sex (Swedish Armed Forces, 2016, Appendix 2, p. 15).

Using language such as “the production output” is a way of distancing from the individual – the members of the organization – that this work concerns. The introduction of gender neutrality (irrespective of sex) could be seen as a way of trying to gain support by men within the military that finds that the focus upon women is too great and that women receive more development opportunities than men (this has been found to be part of men’s individual resistance toward gender equality in the military [Alvinus and Holmberg, 2021]).

The following year, 2017, the Swedish military experienced a #metoo call related to its organization. This is noted in the annual report released a couple of months after the call:

This year’s co-worker assessment (FMVIND) shows a positive development with respect to the co-workers’ views of the Swedish Armed Forces as a workplace and an employer. However, both the assessment and the #metoo call testifies to [...] continued presence of sexual harassment and other violations. The work is *therefore* intensified at both the local and central level, with the purpose that no form of violations should take place within the organization (Swedish Armed Forces, 2017, p. 3, italics added by the authors).

Above, it can be noted that the SAF begin by noting the positive results of the personnel evaluation. The SAF then turn to the fact that sexual abuse is present and that work to prevent it, therefore, needs to be intensified. This suggests that there is little focus on preventive work. The statement normalizes that value statements condemning equality violations only appear when there is a problem. This is actually in conflict with the Swedish law on nondiscrimination, which says that preventive work shall always be conducted. The military organization states that the call was taken seriously and that action has been taken, for instance, the establishment of a telephone hotline (Swedish Armed Forces, 2018, p. 57). It is, however, only the symptoms that are treated not the problems associated with norms and practices within the organization.

The year 2018 is interesting as it contains new elements of the discursive strategies relating to equality work, elements which could be interpreted as resistance through the organizing principle of distancing:

In summary, the government gives a number of directives in different areas that could be associated with personnel supply. [...] Here may be mentioned, among others, to broaden the recruitment to the officer’s level; to increase the number of admissions to the officer’s programs; to continue the implementation of the multiple officer command system, and to, within the framework of equality work, to increase the number of women at all levels (Swedish Armed Forces, 2018, p. 1).

Here, the description of the government as the “external source” of these changes is interesting. This distancing toward the political governance of the armed forces becomes more specific in relation to equality issues, where the SAF have been ordered by the government to adopt their discourse:

The Regulation (2007:1266) with instructions for the Swedish Armed Forces has in 2018 clarified that a gender perspective shall be implemented in the activities of the organization (5 g §). This has led to clarifications in the strategic direction of the organization.

The Swedish Armed Forces shall use the same concepts as political regulations, other agencies and the society in general in order to create opportunities for process tracing and implementation from the political level to the strategic and operational level. The Swedish Armed Forces are therefore replacing their previous use of the concept of “gender” with “equality” in all its directives. (Swedish Armed Forces, 2018, p. 29).

This discourse suggests that an adaptation to the demands of wider society is taking place, but that the SAF are reluctant. This distancing suggests organizational resistance. Clearly, it is not the SAF themselves who choose to do this; it is pressure from the government that makes it necessary. This is explained in the annual report, over and over again. This discursive strategy – perhaps most easily categorized as narrativization (or *deflecting game*), using Vaara, Tienari and Laurila’s (2006) definition – suggests that the armed forces were comfortable with using their own language in relation to gender, but they now have to adhere to another language, which makes the SAF uncomfortable. We interpret this as an example of the use of distance as an organizing principle. In this case, as conceptual definitions are being challenged, the military organization is losing its discursive power. In addition, this change will help the government to monitor the military organization’s equality work.

Conclusions and further research

In this article, it has been shown that it is possible for the armed forces to pursue gender equality policies in the organization, at the same time as they resist these efforts through their organizing principles. The analysis shows that organizational resistance hinders gender equality from gaining ground in the organization – at the same time as the armed forces claim that they are working toward the political goals of gender equality. As noted in previous research, the organizational discourse of resistance is diffuse, but if revealed, its structuring function can be understood (Prasad and Prasad, 2000; Vaara *et al.*, 2006). Our conclusion is that organizational principles, through discursive strategies, build and justify resistance toward gender equality within the SAF. The most frequent discursive strategies are rationalization, authorization and normalization (Vaara *et al.*, 2006). The fact that we do not find any examples of moralization confirms that the issue of gender equality is not associated with values and norms. A key point is that organizational resistance in military organizations has to do with the main organizing principles being challenged by external pressure to adapt to gender equality policies and legislation (compare Holyfield *et al.*, 2017; Muhr and Slok-Andersen, 2017). A counterargument would be that resistance is expected behavior in all types of organizations, especially the military and that it is natural to rank instrumentality over values. From this perspective, the analysis only reveals a “realistic” strategy in relation to gender equality – rather than resistance. However, the empirical material and analysis reveal a power conflict (Dick, 2008) between the discourses of the political and military fields, and the organizing principle of instrumentality and distance are both being questioned by the political field. Indeed, given the subordinate language in relation to these examples at the strategic level of the armed forces, the government has won at least the first round of this power struggle. However, it remains to be seen whether resistance pops up at lower levels. The competition between the military and the political objectives of gender equality may be perceived as contradictory, as at times, the objectives may be shared, for instance, regarding recruitment goals. In this context, it is important to notice that, while the role of the organization in resistance is poorly understood, we know that there is an interaction between the organization and the people within it who try to resist change (Ahrne and Papakostas, 2002). While the organizing principles normally resist organizational changes, more research is needed to determine whether, how, when and under what circumstances they can become the target of organizational changes. It could be

more difficult to address the organizational resistance of military organizations because of their unique goals as public organizations.

Our analysis contributes to the understanding of the role of organizing principles (compare [Thomas et al., 2014](#)). Organizing principles are relational and symbolic but also *functional* in defending the military organization's culture, and this is an expression of power relations and resistance (compare [Wilhoit and Kisselburgh, 2019](#)). In the annual reports, gender equality is continuously reduced and deprioritized through a discursive strategy that rationalizes that equality should only be taken seriously "where it is relevant" to the goals of the SAF. An objection might be that the problem is simply the male cultural domination and sexist beliefs within the military, which consider women to be unsuited for military operations. Irrespective of how relevant these views are in the context of the 21st-century warfare, they result in resistance and need to be removed before change can be achieved. We also need to theoretically reveal how unequal organizations continue their work, in this case, placing the blame either on women themselves or on the society for their perceived interference with the work of the armed forces. Otherwise, men's responsibility and privilege avoid problematization and criticism. Furthermore, the results direct attention to how organizing principles can constitute discriminatory factors against women as a group. Women's rights are not recognized. Much of the existing literature on gender equality work in the military has not recognized this problem but simply sees the logic of instrumentality as a way of making the military organization accept gender equality measures. In fact, this type of research can contribute to upholding the organizing principles of distancing. This view is uncritical, insufficient and counterproductive as it helps resistance to gender equality to flourish in military organizations despite new societal norms and political direction.

However, it should be mentioned that the military has a somewhat unique culture, heavily based on tradition to ensure it is "fit for purpose" – a purpose dictated by government, which in turn are influenced by strategic alliances (e.g. NATO). Gender equality in the military and providing an "inclusive" culture for all is a focus in many other western nations and still proving problematic as a target for resistance strategies ([Reis and Menezes, 2020](#)).

The study's greatest merit lies in the detailed account of identified organizing principles and its effect on gender equality work. The analysis can hopefully be used for educational purposes, for decision-making in the short and long term and at several organizational levels. This is with the aim of raising awareness of how resistance works as an organizing principle. In conducting the analysis, we were reduced to using annual reports that have been limited to six years. Further research could evaluate the generalizability of this study. This can be done through a wider range of data: in-depth interviews with decision-makers as well as longitudinal studies with the aim of mapping organizational principles over time. Organizational resistance may vary over time depending on how stable the organizing principles are.

More research is needed on organizational resistance and the power struggles that take place between different levels of governance. This article has shown that even the core characteristics of the military organization are permeable, and researchers could investigate the major normative transformations that the armed forces of the democratic countries of the world will be going through during the coming years. In this context, the rocking of the gender order may also spur new life into the civil–military relations literature. For future research, it would be useful to examine in more detail the discursive power conflict between the civilian and military fields based on interviews with government and military personnel.

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