

Women Claiming Space in the Military: The Experiences of Female South African Soldiers

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ABSTRACT As the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) continues to expand its role in promoting peace and stability in Africa, the Minister of Defence has called for the full and equal participation of women in all aspects of the SANDF, including military operations. Many South African women embrace this call, though not without difficulty. This paper aims to describe key aspects of women's experiences of their participation in military operations. The written texts of 89 SANDF women with recent operational experience were qualitatively analysed. The findings reveal women's efforts to claim space through joining the military, participating in military operations and seizing leadership positions. The paper also addresses various ways that the military challenges this claiming of space, through undermining woman leaders, sexual harassment and inadequate gender mainstreaming. The data is used to highlight ambivalence in the military, as an institution of hegemonic masculinity, towards the integration of women.

INTRODUCTION

The South African National Defence Force (SANDF) has made good progress towards integrating women into the organisation, evidencing an increase in women in uniform from 13 percent in 1999 to 21 percent in 2009 (Van Breda 2010) and 29 percent in 2015 (DOD 2015). However, the Defence Minister indicates that women remain underrepresented in the SANDF and continue to experience gender discrimination (SAnews.gov.za 2015). Further, when one looks at the representation of women in combat, such as female non-commissioned officers in the infantry, this drops to just 9 percent (Van Breda 2010). While the Minister expresses commitment to gender mainstreaming and the advancement of women in the SANDF (SAnews.gov.za 2015), the 2014 Defence Review (DOD 2014) does not mention 'gender mainstreaming' and says only that the DOD must be gender representative. Thus, while progress is being made, the SANDF has quite some way to go.

Within this context, the current paper aims to investigate women's experiences of the tensions within the military organisation regarding gender mainstreaming. Its two objectives are first to explore the ways in which SANDF women are seeking to take a more central role in the military, and particularly in military operations, and, second, to explore the ways in which SANDF women experience resistance from the military organisation to their taking a central role.

This paper is focused on exploring the ways in which woman soldiers in the SANDF are claiming 'space' for themselves in an institution that is typically regarded as a 'masculine space'. This notion of 'space' was inspired by a deep reading of the interview transcripts, subsequently reinforced by the title of an article by Michel Martin (1982), "From periphery to centre", which described the process of women moving from the periphery of the French military towards its centre. Martin's notion of the military organisation as a physical space through which people can move, evoked an image of the gold rushes in South Africa in which people staked out claims on land using pegs and string. This claiming of land mirrors the process of women moving into the military and staking out land/turf for themselves. The researcher adopted this metaphor as the main theme for the analysis.

Kronsell (2005) has described the military as an institution of hegemonic masculinity where

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certain masculine ideologies are entrenched as normative and prescriptive (Duncanson 2015). Cynthia Enloe has reputedly said, “men *are* the military; women are *in* the military”. It is as if men regard the military space or turf as their own – a male space, dedicated to and dictated by masculine ideologies. Women are intruders and not entitled to space. It is thus noteworthy when women successfully appropriate space.

This paper will detail a number of ways in which woman soldiers in South Africa have claimed space in the military. This appropriation of space is contrasted with women’s experiences of the challenges to their claim on space. The paper will show that public commitment towards a high level of representation of women in the SANDF has not eliminated the hegemonic masculinity of the organisation. Some of the examples advanced will point to the actions of individual men, while others are indicative of structural patterns that serve to marginalise and exclude women from full integration in the military.

The paper will show how the contrast between women’s movement into the military and the military system’s resistance to the integration of women exemplifies the military’s ambivalence, towards gender integration and the contradictory experience of woman soldiers.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The paper is based on the results of a qualitative study to explore women’s own experiences and perceptions of their participation in military operations. The study adopted a qualitative, descriptive research design. From the total population of SANDF women, a purposive sample was drawn of 89 uniformed women, with operational experience in the previous 24 months and reflective of all population groups, ranks, masterings and Services. Individual interviews were conducted with these women by a team of field workers from the SANDF’s Chief Directorate Transformation Management. A structured interview schedule was used to guide the discussion concerning various positive and negative aspects of women’s experiences, of participating in military operations. Field workers or participants wrote down the responses.

The researcher content analysed (Ezzy 2002) the texts. This involved reading and re-reading all the texts several times. Codes were written in the margins of the texts that captured the central

theme of each meaning unit. Repeated coding revealed the tensions regarding gender mainstreaming. Within this framework, the codes were clustered into themes that reflected women’s claiming space within the military and the challenges to women’s claims.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Women Claiming Space in the Military

The advance of women into the military, claiming space for woman soldiers, can be seen in how women described their reasons for joining the military, their experiences of participating in military operations and their experiences of leadership.

Sub-theme 1a. Reasons for Joining the Military

Given the masculine character of the military, it is interesting to explore the factors that motivated women to join the military. While the reasons advanced by the women in this study were varied, there were a number of recurring themes.

Patriotism and the desire to defend and serve the country featured prominently in the motivation of many women to join the military, as illustrated by the following quotation: *‘I wanted to make a difference in my country as a woman in the SANDF.’* (Corporal, Army)

Some joined to obtain a new life experience, something out of the ordinary: *‘I wanted experience in the SANDF.’* (Lance Corporal, Army)

Many joined the military to pursue a life-long career in the military: *‘It was my childhood dream to become a soldier.’* (Corporal, Air Force)

Others expressed their sense that the military is a “man’s world” as the reason for their joining: *‘I wanted to know how it feels to be in a man’s world.’* (Sergeant, Military Health Service)

Certainly, some women did report joining in order to obtain a job; a feature of the socio-economic situation of most South Africans, both male and female. Poverty and high unemployment mean that any available job is better than no job (Kaseeram and Mahadea 2015). This is also consistent with international de-professionalisation of the military, that it is less of a calling/vocation and more of a job that pays the rent (Heineken

2014), and corresponds with the findings of Alchin (2015) in the South African Infantry.

Overall, however, these responses point to a majority of women joining the military with the intent of claiming a space for themselves as soldiers. Some of these have conceptualised their joining in explicitly gendered terms.

Sub-theme 1b. Participation in Military Operations

Many women in the SANDF have participated in military peacekeeping operations in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In relating what was positive about their deployment experience, the majority mentioned military factors that suggest that their deployment experience has led to an expansion of their space; that they feel a greater sense of belonging, of moving from the periphery to the centre of the military:

'[I valued] going to sea as a bridge watch keeper, taking command. It taught me perseverance, confidence in myself. I learned that nothing in life comes easy; you have to work hard to achieve your goals.' (Lieutenant, Navy)

'[I valued] seeing the whole army doing one attack. To see other units operating their weapons.' (Lance Corporal, Army)

Some participants referred to what they gained from their experience of deployments in explicitly gendered terms:

'I'm very proud because I'm not just a woman. I am a woman in uniform serving my country with pride.' (Captain, Air Force)

'Managed to excel in male dominated world – people valued my opinion because I knew what I was talking about. Knowing what I am capable of and knowing that the ship's company needed me and that I did my part.' (Lieutenant Commander, Navy)

These responses show woman soldiers regarding themselves as full and equal participants in military operations. Since operations are the military's core business and since women have historically been barred from participation in operations, these responses suggest that SANDF women are claiming a central place in the military system. They are not relegated to peripheral, second line or support roles. Rather, they have claimed a space for themselves in the front, alongside their male comrades.

Sub-theme 1c. Experiences in Leadership

The women in this study aspire to promotion, to positions of leadership and responsibility. This also is a way of claiming space – women are not content to remain in subordinate positions to male commanders. The experience of men undermining women's authority did not result in their abandoning these positions of leadership. Rather, it steeled them to pursue the positions more assertively, to claim their space more tenaciously:

'[My deployment experiences] were positive because it shows me I'm capable of being responsible and leading people.' (Lance Corporal, Army)

'I had a chance to lead and was responsible for the [Medical Task Group]. That will never happen in my [home unit].' (Captain, Military Health Service)

'The fact that I could be a good leader being a woman [made the deployment experience positive].' (Captain, Military Health Service)

These women interpret the experience of being in a leadership position as evidence that they have secured their position in the military; they are no longer peripheral, but central.

Discussion on Theme 1

Together, the data presents women in the SANDF as claiming a full and equal place in the military. Many women are serious about pursuing a career in the military, eager to learn and grow in operational experience and enthusiastic about opportunities for promotion and leadership responsibilities. This level of positivity among women is, however, not universal. Alchin's (2015) research on women in the South African Infantry found more negative feelings and experiences than in this study, which may reflect an unintended sampling of women who were more positive about being in the military. Thus these findings should not be generalised to all women in the SANDF.

A US Navy study suggests that deployments increase women's feeling of being integrated into the military, which in turn elicits a stronger commitment to a military career (Kelley et al. 2001). If women are relegated to only certain positions, especially support roles, the message is given that they are not full members of the military; the

military remains a male organisation in which women are tolerated only on the edges. By contrast, South African women have moved into central positions, both in their participation in military operations and in their assumption of leadership roles, which conveys the message that they are recognised as full members of the military.

Women's sense of the military as a career is also dependent on the opportunities afforded for career progression. In the Russian Armed Forces, for example, women are rarely promoted beyond the rank of Major, which does not foster enthusiasm for pursuing a military career (Ustinovich 2003). Huss and Cwikel (2015) report a comparable position regarding the Israeli Defence Force, where, although they are conscripted, women could participate in combat roles only since 2000 and in very small numbers (just 4% of women serve in combat). While the SANDF still has some way to go in ensuring representation of women in senior positions, there has been progress in this direction. Each advance expands the space that women have claimed in the SANDF, which in turn increases the opportunities for younger women to pursue a military career.

Earlier it was noted that many writers describe the military system as a hegemonic masculinity. Some of the women in this study appear to have recognised the SANDF as being a male world. Rather than deterring them from joining, this seems to have inspired them to demand a place in this world. They relate a sense of accomplishment when they prove their ability to perform their military tasks effectively. Each accomplishment marks out additional space in the military for women, thereby challenging hegemonic masculinity. Kronsell (2005) argues that when women, even in small numbers, enter an institution such as the military, their mere presence challenges masculinist norms. A challenge of this nature brings into question the ownership of space; specifically, women challenge the assumption that this space belongs to men.

Theme 2: Challenges to Women's Claim

Thus far, it may seem that women's claim on space in the SANDF has proceeded smoothly with the full support of the military system and male soldiers, and with the full support of female soldiers themselves. In fact, this is not invariably the case. Rather, women's claims have been challenged in various ways. These challenges

convey the message that women do not belong in the military – that the military is still a male space. In this section three challenges are presented, namely challenges to women's leadership, the inadequacy of gender mainstreaming and experiences of sexual harassment.

Sub-theme 2a. Challenges to Women's Leadership

Several women reported difficulties in asserting their authority over male subordinates. They experienced some men as passive aggressive, disrespectful or openly dismissive of their authority because they are women:

'When you are in charge leading the men, it's difficult, because some men believe they won't take any order from women.' (Leading Seaman, Navy)

'The only challenge was to discipline the men onboard. They didn't like the fact that a woman told them what to do or not to do. They didn't respect my authority.' (Commander, Navy)

The fact that South African women report that some men dismiss them as leaders because they are women suggests that some men see women as inherently less able to lead. Looney's (2004) study on leadership in the US Air Force, however, found no difference in the performance ratings of male and female leaders. He also found that the gender of the rater made no difference to the ratings, despite the fact that he found men to hold more traditional gender roles than women.

However, the experience of the women in this study is that men do not consistently respect their authority, and that some men are quite blatant at rejecting their authority *because of their gender*. Similar findings have been reported in the South Korean military, where two-thirds of male soldiers see women as being inferior leaders (Hong 2002). It seems that even when the SANDF publicly recognises the leadership ability of women, some men are unable to accommodate women in leadership and therefore challenge their position. This is a masculine challenge to the leadership space that women have won.

Sub-theme 2b. Gender Mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming refers to "the process of assessing the implications for women and

men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels" (UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) 1997). Because men's needs have been normative in military planning, gender mainstreaming currently entails foregrounding primarily women's needs (Stiehm 2001). Gender mainstreaming has been adopted as policy by the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations (Guéhenno n.d.), as well as by the SANDF.

However, despite the adoption of a policy that seeks to locate gendered planning within the routine of the SANDF, many women cited the inadequacy of facilities as perhaps the single biggest frustration during deployments:

'When your pads are finished you can't buy them at [the base shop]. We were not allowed to use local taxis to go to town and transport was not provided for lower ranks, so it was difficult to go to town and buy.' (Corporal, Army)

'Having your periods on deployment is not fun. It causes a bit of discomfort, especially if there's water restrictions.' (Lieutenant, Navy)

'Most women get infections because of toilet chemicals.' (Captain, Air Force)

'Commanders are making funny jokes about us, for example "Where are you going to throw your pads? I don't want to see [tampons] lying around. You are going to the field for three days – where are you going to wash your smell?" They never saw any pads lying around so we don't know their problem.' (Private, Army)

In this study, the issue of menstruation was a primary cause of dissatisfaction with ablution facilities. This is shared in the findings of other researchers. For example, Trego's (2007) study in the USA found that menstruation intensified during deployments and that managing menstruation was complicated and inconvenient, particularly regarding heat, dirt and portable toilets.

The SANDF women reported the lack of ablutions, having to share ablution facilities with men, the lack of sanitary bins for soiled pads, the lack of water for personal hygiene, the inability to access sanitary pads and medication to deal with menstruation, and unsafe ablution facilities and living quarters. They argued that all of these factors are necessary for women to maintain personal hygiene, and thus cannot be considered luxuries, but necessities. It seems that these facilities are not always ensured prior to deploying women into certain areas, sug-

gesting a lack of consideration for the needs of women, or perhaps that these needs are considered 'nice to have's', and thus low on the priority list, a failure of gender mainstreaming. Alchin (2015) reports similar findings in her study of South African infantry women.

Wardell and Czerwinski (2001: 188) describe this as a process of 'othering' women: when men's needs are defined as the norm, women's needs – and women themselves – become "un-essential, ... abnormal, or ... negative". The othering of women's needs is compounded in the case of menstruation because it is seldom discussed between women and men.

The women's descriptions of their frustrations with facilities to deal with menstruation are somewhat muted in this study, as if they do not want to make a fuss about menstruation. The pressure to integrate women in operational areas is considerable, and women may feel that they need to sort out issues like menstruation quietly and unobtrusively. There appears to be a 'code of silence' around menstruation (Wardell and Czerwinski 2001: 192). Perhaps women fear that complaining about menstrual concerns will reinforce men's perceptions that women can't cope in the field. The humiliating comments cited above bear witness to the validity of this fear.

The lack of gender mainstreaming and the 'othering' of women point to the persistence of hegemonic masculinity; male needs remain the norm in the SANDF. It seems that the notion of 'equality' is conflated with 'sameness'. Consequently, planning that recognises that women have needs that are unique from men is viewed as providing women with special privileges. The experiences reported by the women in this study belie the reality that the SANDF notion of what soldiers need is still largely defined as what *men* need.

Sub-theme 2c. Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is a ubiquitous concern in most workplaces, but especially in those spheres that have traditionally been the domain of men, such as the military. It is, however, often hidden (Heineken 2002), and women experience ambivalence around speaking out about sexual harassment. This study suggests that there is a significant rate of sexual harassment in the SANDF's deployment areas. Ten of the 89 wom-

en explicitly indicated that they had experienced sexual harassment during deployments. A further eight women denied being harassed, but provided examples of behaviours that could be regarded as harassment, such as sexual jokes, gestures, comments, remarks, approaches/proposals and subtle challenges. Thus, 12 to 20 percent of women were sexually harassed during deployments. In addition, 35 women (39%) reported that sexual harassment was an issue of concern:

'Most of women are harassed by senior ranks and don't want to come forward about it, because they're scared of their future.' (Sergeant, Air Force)

'Some of the men were pests and I stopped associating with many of them. In the end I only mixed with medical staff and few others.' (Lieutenant Colonel, Military Health Service)

'Some women, especially low ranking females do [experience sexual harassment]. The men feel as though women are inferior: only there to cook, clean and even expect sexual favours.' (Second Lieutenant, Army)

The international military literature is replete with evidence of high rates of sexual harassment, with 65 to 79 percent of women in the US military reporting sexual harassment annually (Buchanan et al. 2014). Researchers have found sexual harassment to be related to various factors, including the ratio of men to women, organisational tolerance of sexual harassment and organisational climate (Buchanan et al. 2014). Sexual harassment is an important concern for the military, not only because it is a violation of the human rights of women, but also because the experience of harassment decreases job satisfaction and increases the intention to quit (Snyder and Scherer 2015). A hostile working environment that is fraught with sexual harassment threatens the attainment of the SANDF goal to mainstream women into senior management.

The inconsistency of the data in this study confirms the finding of others that women are often ambivalent about reporting sexual harassment (Alchin 2015). This is illustrated by the following statement, which begins with an instance of sexual harassment that the participant then trivialises:

'Some male sailors will still jokingly say that a woman's place is barefoot in the kitchen but the attitudes of sailors have changed considerably over the last 3-5 years, and women

are now accepted as integral members of the ship's company.' (Lieutenant Commander, Navy)

As with menstruation, women may fear that complaining about harassment may undermine them as women and exacerbate the feeling of being an outsider, reinforcing the experience of 'othering' and leading to a 'code of silence' (Pershing 2003). They may also be anxious about whether their concerns will be adequately addressed by management (Snyder and Scherer 2015). This is complicated in the SANDF by the absence of staff specifically trained to deal with harassment.

An additional dynamic may be that of the trivialisation of sexual harassment which is derived "in part from [women's] construction of alternative gender identities that emulate the masculine model of the combat soldier" (Sasson-Levy 2003: 447). Men use sexual harassment to maintain the hegemonic masculinity of the military system. When women respond to harassment they inadvertently contribute to the hegemony by implying that they are weak and sensitive, characteristics contrary to the dominant notion of 'soldier'. By ignoring or trivialising harassment, women become 'one of the guys', thereby retaining their space in the military. Of course, this perpetuates the masculine system and the pattern of sexual harassment. Either way – challenging or trivialising sexual harassment – the space that women have won is challenged. As such, sexual harassment is an extremely effective weapon in challenging women's space in the military.

DISCUSSION

Given that the military is "one of the most prototypically masculine of all social institutions" (Heineken 2002: 715), it is no surprise that women have a difficult time claiming space for themselves as legitimate and centrally placed members. This study has highlighted a tension between women's efforts to claim space in the military and the persistent hegemonic masculinity of the SANDF.

In the first instance, it is clear from this study that many South African women are quite serious about advancing into the military as full and equal partners. The dominant voice from the data is of women who regard themselves as soldiers, demanding the same respect, opportunities and rewards as men. Some women have engaged

quite consciously with their experience as *women* in a traditionally man's world. It seems that the more operational experience women have, the more confident they become about their place in the military and the more they are sure of claiming their space. Similarly, as women gain experience of leadership, they appear to expand their space, even when (or *especially* when) men challenge their leadership.

In the second place, however, the data is clear that the advancement of women in the SANDF is not without complications and the space that women have claimed seems to be under constant threat. Some of this comes from individual men in the SANDF, men who tell women that they are not welcome in the deployment areas, disregard women's military authority or sexually harass women. These are men who have benefited from "the patriarchal nature of South African society" (Motumi 1999: 28), which is mirrored in the SANDF's hegemonic masculinity. They appear to regard women as an intrusion in their male space and utilise powerful mechanisms to exclude women.

Although study participants were at pains to point out that most men are supportive of women's participation in military operations, we must contextualise the behaviour of the few misogynist males and not individualise/personalise their behaviour. Feminists have long argued that "the personal is political" (Whelehan 1995: 13) and this is no less true for the behaviour of men. The individual men who push women out of their space are located within a masculinist system that has made men and masculinity normative. There is at least a tacit agreement within the military system that this is a man's world, providing support to individual instances of sexual harassment and the dismissal of the authority of woman leaders.

Beyond the individuals who challenge women's space, the military system itself challenges women's space. This is seen most clearly in the inadequacy of gender mainstreaming. Men are still regarded as the norm; thus women's unique needs are 'deviant'. The SANDF, despite the various ways in which it is a remarkably progressive organisation, still conceives of the average soldier as male. Thus any requirement of women, such as amenities to manage menstruation, is regarded as evidence of gender inequality, confirming women's unsuitability for operational service.

These factors are not at the level of the individual; they are too pervasive. Rather, they are a legacy of the military being a male space, which celebrates the "warrior hero archetype" (Johnson 2014: 113). Within this paradigm, women are homemakers, vulnerable and in need of protection – women are not soldiers, comrades and commanders (Alchin 2015). Despite a number of marked structural changes in South African legislation and SANDF policy and employment quotas, this patriarchal paradigm remains prominent. This is evident in an SANDF study in which 27 percent of male soldiers reported that they would hate to have a female boss (Van Breda 2000: 39).

The combination of these two features – women's claim on military space and the military's challenge to that claim – points to the military's ambivalence towards gender integration. There are a number of external imperatives, such as the Constitution of South Africa and the White Paper on Defence which mandate integration (Motumi 1999). In addition, there is recognition among a number of key senior officials (up to the minister) of the importance of gender integration. However, there is also a resistance to this change that, while not the focus of this study, may be related to the loss of male privilege and questions about military effectiveness.

The ambivalence of the military system towards gender integration creates a contradictory experience for women, which can be heard when reading the data. Women get the double message to "join the military, but don't join". In some ways women have been encouraged to claim their space; the recruitment quotas for women and the increasing promotional opportunities indicate that women are recognised as central to the military space. But in other ways women are challenged when they claim their space – their needs are not consistently catered for in the deployment areas and they are harassed and told to go back home where they belong. How are people to make sense of these contradictory messages?

It seems that the majority of women in this study have utilised the exclusionary messages as incentives to work harder in staking out their claim on space. Rather than retreating in the face of challenge, they become more insistent on their human right to occupy space in the military. Some would argue that this is an instance of women being assimilated into a masculinist culture, of

women 'becoming men' in order to fit in (Höpfl 2003). Sjöberg (2007: 93) similarly argues that "these women are [merely] allowed to participate in a military force still dominated by masculinities". But perhaps this is rather an instance of women becoming empowered to demand unrestricted and equal access to the same opportunities as anyone else. Kronsell (2005) argues from feminist standpoint theory that the presence of these women will gradually lead to the disintegration of the hegemonic masculinity that continues to characterise the SANDF.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that while women in South Africa are increasingly and successfully claiming space in the military with the official support of the State and the SANDF itself, this claim is continuously challenged in their lived experience. Time will tell whether the SANDF is able to make the transition from a hegemonic masculinity to some other form of identity that is more inclusive of a range of masculinities and femininities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study make it clear that it is important to continue to work towards integrating women into the SANDF, so as to shift the gender ratio towards greater balance. Patriarchal systems and patterns should be continuously challenged, through education of both women and men, through policies that censor sexism, and through celebrating the role of women in the military. Women's needs need to be mainstreamed into military planning, such as the provision of health services and facilities regarding menstrual and urogenital health. Sexual harassment needs to continuously be challenged and cases of harassment followed up firmly. Women in the military need to be conscientised about claiming their space, so that they recognise their unique role and contribution to an integrated military.

NOTE

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