

Collective Action in Operational Mixed-Gender Units on Israel's Borders

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Women in Combat Roles

The inclusion of women in military organizations, their placement in combat roles, and their participation in operational action on the frontline is a lengthy and gradual process. Many debates have accompanied this process, most of which have centred on arguments in favour of or against the integration of women in military forces for biological, psychological, and cultural reasons (DeLance, 2016). Despite these debates, the process of integration of women in military organizations continues and grows even in Western armies that are considered “traditional” and that have normally tended to exclude women from combat roles. This integration process has aroused much curiosity in academia and has been intensively studied in the social sciences, medicine, and public policy research. A central sociological area of study in this field is the social stratification of women in the army and the reproduction of their status as a marginal factor in the military organization and its accompanying social capital. One of the main explanations for this phenomenon centres on the social and cultural barriers which ultimately result in the continuous marginalization of women in armies. Historically there is a strong connection between war, the military, and masculinity (Goldstein, 2001). One of the topics of debate among military commanders and social scientists is the possibility that allowing women to take part in operational units would undermine the cohesiveness of the military unit. The acknowledgement of the importance of cohesiveness in small combat groups strongly enhances these fears, especially in view of the assumption among many researchers that cohesiveness in military units is based on brotherhood or comradeship among men (Rosen *et al.*, 2003). The combat military unit functions under harsh conditions and uncertainty, and therefore attributes such as cohesiveness and a strong sense of secureness in its military force and its commanders are perceived as essential. This often leads to the establishment of a Hyper Masculine culture which may undermine the integration of women into such units (Archer, 2013). This argument can be responded to by raising a number of questions, especially in view of accumulated experience in cohesiveness patterns in operational military units, whereby it has been found that these units operate well even without much prior familiarity between its members (Ben-Shalom, Lehrer & Ben-ari, 2005). Moreover, it has been proven in Western armies that women have functioned well at the frontline and that their ability to integrate into combat units depends more on the quality of their professional-military training which allows social integration or on the unit's cohesiveness (King, 2013). As argued by Anthony King (2013, p.9), women can be integrated into combat roles without undermining the unit's cohesiveness, provided that they possess the necessary functional-operational skills : “*It is imperative that only women who can actually perform in the combat role, contributing to small unit cohesion are assigned to it*”.

Social Diversity in Military Units

A further central topic in the study of the integration of women into armies is social or military diversity. Military sociologists who have studied this area have been interested in the barriers for the integration of women into combat units and the effect of such integration on combat functioning and sense of readiness. However, the vast majority of sociological studies in this field focused on the macro level of policy, with few studies conducted within the military units themselves, in the field, and on the frontlines (Lomsky-Feder & Ben-Ari, 2013). As in many other areas of military research, Israel is an important comparative case study. Although there are countries where women have been more deeply integrated into combat roles compared with Israel, the IDF's continual involvement in combat situations exposes women to substantial frontline operational challenges, a fact that significantly enhances the importance of the Israeli case. As in most other countries, the process of integrating women into operational units in Israel has evoked widespread social debate outside of the Army.

Sasson-Levy (2003) pointed to the diverse social and behavioural processes taking place in the context of women's service in the military, which by nature is a "masculine" organization where men have a central place. This fact leads to a range of barriers to the integration of women, which become greater in frontline areas and ground forces combat roles where masculine dominance is especially strong. Despite possible opposition to the inclusion of women in military units, it was a shortage of manpower in the IDF that ultimately resulted in new roles opening up for women in combat and command roles (Cohen, 2008). The process of integration of women into the IDF gradually evolved in the 1990s and started to become an area of interest among Israeli military sociologists, as can be seen from the huge body of studies that have been published on the topic of gender in the IDF. Sasson-Levy & Amram-Katz (2007) have shown how the increased range of roles and mixed-gender training courses open to women in the IDF have led in some cases to a counter-process of re-gendering. These researchers interpret organizational and cultural processes within the process of female integration into military training in a way that points to the constant marginalization of women. Thus, for instance, they have identified differences in commanders' responses to emotional exhibitions by men and by women as a dual process of "de-gendering" and "re-gendering":

Our argument is that despite the declared aim of the integrated course to degender the military organization and create an equal-opportunity environment for women, gender integration has actually led to a dual process of degendering and regendering [Sasson-Levy & Amram-Katz, 2007, p.106].

This pioneering study was conducted in 2003 at the IDF's female officers' training school, before it was integrated into the male officer's training school in 2005. The study was held in an officer cadets' battalion in a non-combat branch and to a significant extent expressed the gap between the prestige of combat and non-combat roles. The researchers reported, among their other findings, on differences in roles and attributes between men and women. Women showed advantages in the cognitive and emotional areas. Four years

later, in a follow-up study, the same researchers argued that male and female cadets in mixed-gender battalions in the officers' training school expressed indifference towards the integration of men with women, perceiving it as something natural (Sasson-Levy & Amtram-Katz, 2007, p.130). Beyond the importance of these pioneering findings themselves, they also raise an important matter in the area of behavioural sciences research in military organizations. These types of field studies enable the establishment of different points of view on social processes relating to the military service of men and women characteristic of mixed-gender units. The many advantages of Sasson-Levy's 2003 study, or Lomsky-Feder and Ben Ari's 2013 study illustrate this argument, as the proximity to the field facilitates an understanding of important social and organizational processes which are difficult to comprehend in studies focusing on the macro level of civil-military relations. Despite its advantages, social research on operational units is difficult to execute due to the limitations of accessibility to frontline areas. These difficulties often lead to studies that rely on interviews conducted after the interviewees have already completed their military service. This approach is also dominant in studies on women's military service experiences after they have been discharged.¹ Debates in civil society concerning gender integration in the military are likely to make the military institution overcautious in permitting such a study (Levy, 2010). Such difficulties are prevalent in sociological studies within military organizations, and their implementation requires obtaining permits which are very difficult to come by. This results in the need to exercise caution on the part of the researchers, who are required to precisely report their findings, without becoming representatives of the military system itself (Ben-Ari & & Levy, 2014).

Mixed-Gender Units on Israel's Borders

The process of the integration of women into combat units is not identical across all military organizations and its extent is greatly affected by the practical needs and military culture of each nation and its military (Carreiras, 2016). Moreover, the practical and immediate needs of armies may accelerate processes of integration of women in times of emergency (Schaefer *et al.*, 2015). A shortage of manpower resources has been a central challenge for the IDF, and is one of the factors that led the Army's leading command to consider a more substantial integration of women into combat roles, as well as in border areas. Securing the country's borders is considered an operational task which does not require an identical level of qualification as that of combat attack units ; therefore, some of these tasks are perceived as possible for execution by women. This has opened a path to the integration of a substantial number of women into combat roles in operational field units. The securing of Israel's borders requires unique military attributes, mechanisms, operational logic, and investment in manpower. At Israel's northern border with Lebanon there is the risk of close military combat with the Hezbollah and even with Syrian forces on the Golan Heights. A similar situation exists on Israel's border with the Gaza Strip. In contrast, on its eastern and southern borders Israel has signed peace agreements with

¹ Karazi-Presler, Sasson-Levy & Lomsky-Feder, 2017.

Jordan and Egypt, and consequently the risk of military action on these borders is much more moderate. This does not mean that these borders are “quiet” ones, as much smuggling of goods and many illegal crossings of asylum seekers take place in these areas. In addition, the border with Egypt is characterized by a constant threat of terror operations. This combination of risks in a single border area results in an operational logic that is not easily absorbed by military units deployed on the border.² One of the central challenges encountered by combat units positioned for long durations near borders is the ability to ascribe meaning to their task (Peled, 2006). By nature, a peaceful border entails monotonous guarding and securing tasks. The operational risk level is low, and soldiers deployed to these areas often experience frustration and boredom, all the more so when they aspire to experience “real” military action.³ Such border security tasks are normally given relatively low priority in the allocation of technological resources, with posts manned by forces with only basic combat training levels and furnished with relatively modest military and technical equipment.

One such example is Israel’s southern border with Egypt, which for years had been a quiet border, prioritized at a very low level of military threat. In parallel, a shortage of manpower resources in the IDF led to the establishment of IDF units suited to the level of threat in terms of the investment of munitions and training resources. This is also the reason that some of the IDF’s first mixed-gender units (MGUs) were placed in border areas. A preliminary study on MGUs carrying out security missions at the separation barrier area was conducted in 2010 by Ben-Ari, Lerer, Ben-Shalom and Vainer. The researchers argued that along this border the IDF methodologically examined diverse types of units and that technological developments facilitated the establishment of operational units with new mission characteristics. This preliminary ethnographic study documented the gradual inclusion of women in a range of operational roles in the IDF, a process that has been greatly enhanced from the year 2000 onwards. This was the “ground forces” dimension of a process that had also taken place in parallel in the Air Force and the Navy (Zur & Raz, 2008), as well as in the border police forces. The female soldiers included in the preliminary study – observation post workers, drivers of combat vehicles, and military policewomen in border crossing units – told of their service experiences. Some of the themes raised in that qualitative study centred on the gap between a high initial motivation for a meaningful military service and the wear and monotony of operational reality. Other themes included the continuous struggle among female soldiers for acknowledgment of their performances in these roles and for proving themselves worthy.

The current study is a follow-up to that preliminary one, focusing on MGUs that operated on the Israel-Egypt border during peaceful times. The present article focuses on these units as an organizational system operating on the border and the organizational processes which enable collective action in a mixed-gender battalion.

² Ben-Ze’ev & Gazit, 2016.

³ Harris & Segal, 1985 ; Ben-Shalom & Glicksohn, 2013.

The Current Study

Women's military service in combat units has been a central focus of attention among sociologists and commanders alike, and has been studied from many angles. A substantial corpus of IDF studies on this topic published in the Hebrew journal "Systems" (*Maarachot*) was dedicated to deliberations and debates between senior officers on this matter.⁴ IDF psychologists and physiologists also showed interest in the topic and examined it in a long series of studies.⁵ A review of many of these papers and studies reveals that they were written from a moral perspective – either supporting or opposing the integration of women. While the current paper is aware of this debate, it does not intend to express an opinion on the matter, but rather relies on the personal experience of the two authors as organizational consultants and researchers in these units. We intend to summarize the findings of our fieldwork and present it in light of the preliminary study in which the first author participated over a decade ago (Ben-Ari *et al.*, 2014). Contrary to that study, the units we have now studied are no longer in their "experimental" stages.

These units were established after similar ones had been formed and evaluated. While some of the units are relatively new compared to regular ground forces units, they are equipped with well-defined work procedures, facilities, and equipment, and possess extensive operational knowledge in their areas of operation, making them operational units for all intents and purposes. Our working assumption has been that the internal-organizational processes within a military organization have a substantial effect on the quality of the operational action of its forces.⁶ Naturally, the study of such processes on a daily, practical level is not a simple task and requires accessibility and permits. However, such a field study may shed light on the gender integration and collective action process in combat forces. Based on the study of these processes, our research questions are the following: (1) how does gender integration function in MGUs on borders?; (2) what are the central social processes characteristic of the operation of such a unit?

Methodology

Information Sources

Our information sources in this study are based on the experiences of the first author who participated in a preliminary study on MGUs at the separation barrier area (Ben Ari *et al.*, 2011). Later, the first author was responsible for military psychology research in the IDF ground forces, and conducted a large number of in-depth interviews, focus groups, observations and feedback conversations with commanders as well as with female and male combatants serving in MGUs. From these studies he concluded that all in all the mixed-gender unit is an operational unit working to achieve well-defined tasks, and that its soldiers do not perceive gender integration in the same way as in Israel's civil society

⁴ For instance : Haliwa, 2004 ; Lankri, 2014.

⁵ Epstein, Fleischmann, Yanovich & Heled, 2015.

⁶ Ben-Shalom & Benbenisty, 2017.

debates. In 2017 he conducted 15 additional in-depth interviews with female and male soldiers in reserve forces who had operated in Mixed Gender Units, with the aim of gaining an understanding of their experiences during their collective service. In parallel, the two other authors conducted 23 further in-depth interviews with soldiers and commanders in MGUs established in 2017 at the Jordan Valley area. These interviews were held at the posts where these units operate, usually at soldiers' barracks or in the offices of commanding officers. Their purpose was to examine how soldiers perceive gender collaboration and to define the organizational processes that affect it.

Data Analysis

The collected information was reread, classified, and analyzed by the authors in an attempt to identify and screen all references to the gender issue. At this stage we ignored all other aspects raised in the conversations and focused only on the topic of gender integration. The content raised in the interviews was sorted and analyzed according to the main themes raised in them (Shkedi, 2003), resulting in a range of categories such as "military leadership in MGUs"; "military service experience on the border"; "division of labour"; and "challenges of commanders". In a second reading of the information collected on the gender topic, two fundamental themes were defined in relation to collective action: carrying out the operational task and processes in the organization of the unit in support of collective action.

Findings

The Operational Mission

Mixed-gender service as a given fact. A prominent finding that arose from our analysis has been the fact that in general our interviewees accepted mixed-gender service as a given fact rather than a topic to be complained about or remarked on. While they were well aware of the ongoing debate in Israeli society and the media regarding mixed-gender service, they discussed the matter not as a topic to be debated but simply as a practical matter, sometimes in relation to the public debate, and sometimes in comparison to other units. For instance :

I am very familiar with the issue of comradeship, which is something that exists in infantry battalions. I have seen it from up close all my life. It's true, when there are boys together then a comradeship evolves. Brothers. We men, when we are together, we are baboons. Baboons ! But, to say that it can only happen among men, because they sweat together and stink together, it's probably not true. The comradeship evolves following difficulty, following the fact that everybody experiences the difficulties together and copes with it each individually and everyone together as a group. The Army loves the word "synergy." The personal difficulty becomes that of the group, and so the group comes together. So I can unequivocally tell you that I see this comradeship here as well, and it is even stronger than in the older battalions of the boys. The male and female soldiers here are like brothers and sisters. I have first-hand information from the soldiers, because I am the battalion's sergeant major and I

know how to sniff around and ask them all kinds of questions in order to collect information. I belong to the commanding staff, but I am not with the officers. I know how to be at the same level with the soldiers to get them talking and collect information. So when I talk to soldiers they may say to me during the conversation, about a certain female soldier, “she’s like a sister to me”, or “she is my sister”. It is said from the bottom of their hearts, it’s real, and I think it’s a social power that doesn’t fall short of the social connection we find in other operational infantry battalions.” [NCO, 2017].

The words of this experienced NCO show an awareness of the existing comparisons between the situation in a MGU and other battalions where a more masculine culture is prevalent. However, his conclusion regarding the social relationships in the MGU focuses on the very high cohesiveness between men and women which originates from common difficulties. References to the nature of these units as having gender diversity were mostly positive ones. Female combatants in a mixed-gender battalion said that: “[...] *We are together so much that it is no longer so exciting and cool as might be seen from the outside. It’s normal and normative*” [female combatant, 2017].

Similar thoughts were voiced by the units’ commanders, who described the mixed-gender service as a matter to be managed and not as a problem that disrupts the unit’s operation or the execution of their roles:

The presence of women in the unit pushes men who are of a slightly low status to succeed. Suddenly they see a woman who can do it, and they cannot allow themselves to stay behind, so they make a much greater effort than they would have had they been there without the girls. The presence of a girl also helps in the context of having someone to talk to. Sometimes there are things that under no circumstances will you tell a boy, but if there is a girl around then it is easier, and maybe suddenly you even feel you want to tell her. I have not seen any situation in which comradeship has been undermined. Combatants is a plural term, so comradeship in Hebrew also includes the girls who are a part of this group. The fact is that after completing the day’s work everyone sits together, with no gendered division into groups [company commander, 2017].

This of course does not imply that everything in MGUs is agreeable or accepted by all equally. We also heard criticism, especially among male soldiers in the initial stages of their service and among soldiers or commanders whose general opinion on gender integration is not a positive one. Some of them express a belief that serving together with women lowers the status of their service. This position was expressed mostly by male soldiers who had just begun their service: “*Outside [the unit] they tell me : what are you, a chick ? Fighting with girls...* (male combatant, 2017).

Here is what a more senior commander had to say on the topic :

I see this structure of males and females together as a failure, even if everyone will say the opposite. The solution is not to establish mixed-gender units, but uni-gender ones. If you establish a unit of women only – that unit will thrive. Put women [there], give them female commanders, who know exactly what their soldiers are going through. They know the issues physiologically. Female

commanders cope with female soldiers better than male commanders. And also – male soldiers will better accept the authority of a male commander than that of a woman commander [company commander, 2017].

However, when discussing issues for improvement, the discussion centres on the professional ability of the unit with nearly no references made to gender as part of the evaluation of ability in this area. Professional ability does not correspond to gender perception and is determined by the study participants based on parameters such as professionalism, skill, seniority, or attention to the soldiers at the post, but not “femininity” or “masculinity”. Interviewees specifically emphasized their sense of comradeship in the unit and a cohesiveness rising out of continuous common difficulties.

The border experience. A central component in the data collected from the field work of the first author, the border experience is defined by the physical distance from the centre of the country and by the monotonous tasks. Interestingly, this data can also emerge through the study of the ways in which combat units posted on this border for specific periods of time perceive this task, as compared to the units that participated in the study, for whom the border mission is the normal situation and not a “temporary problem”. During the period of the study most of the tasks included prevention of smuggling and screening for signs of terrorist operations in the area. This type of activity may be highly risky at times, but in general is below the level of combat prowess required by combat units in the regular Army. This issue was raised mainly among soldiers and commanders from the regular Army battalions deployed for this task. This is what we heard from soldiers and commanders from an elite infantry battalion:

We were prepared for a high level of operational tension, but in practice this was not the case. Sand, more sand, and smugglings [combat soldier from an infantry battalion] ;

There is a lot of criminal action and it is confusing. The reality on the border is criminal. Three to four attempts at illegal crossings of the border per day : either trespassing or smuggling. It’s confusing for the combatants and the commanders because there is no preparedness for hostile attacks [company commander in an infantry battalion].

In contrast, from both soldiers and commanders in the permanently deployed MGUs that participated in our study, we heard a different discourse; these participants stated that they are well aware of the nature of their task, are not at all confused as to the characteristics of the work at the border, and are focused on their effort to persist in their task in view of its challenges:

I think that a much higher quality of routine security operations is being done here. Things are being taken seriously. The girls are very serious. It’s their commando unit. And anyhow, it’s the only IDF battalion where there are no “junior to short-timers” (*Tzeirim Vatikim*) relations among female soldiers. High quality: people towards the end of their service; short-timers are fully alert and keeping their personal readiness [deputy company commander].

Collaboration Supporting Processes in the Unit's Organization

The collected information depicts highly organized and experienced military units, operating according to routine procedures, with gender collaboration being perceived as something natural. A review of the collected information gives rise to the argument that this situation is a result of specific organizational processes that enable collaboration. Here is an example, from a conversation with a female combatant:

In principle, basic training is three months, plus four more months' advanced training, all done together, together, together, no privileges, everything the same, whether it's the beret trek, regular treks, sleeping in the field, all the same. Look, it's not that from the first month we are best friends straightaway, it's difficult... it takes time to get used to living with boys 24/7 and to feel comfortable to talk about the most personal things, such as, you know... I need to go to the bathroom and things like that (...) in the first month it's embarrassing, but after that (...) because it's so intensive... you get used to it [female section commander, 2017].

These processes take place in light of the accumulated practical experience characteristic of MGUs, which is expressed in three main areas: military leadership, division of labour, and internal screening processes and officers' development.

Military leadership. Military leadership in MGUs is characterized by a number of informal knowledge areas, in addition to the professional knowledge required of combat commanders in any ground forces unit. This knowledge seems important to commanders in order to be able to cope with the challenges of leadership in a MGU and to establish trust in their leadership among their subordinates. This knowledge originates in the fact that women are a large part of the manpower of the MGU, and commanders gradually develop practical knowledge and experience in order to successfully operate in this context. During our study, the majority of senior commanders in the battalions were male, and the officers, especially the senior ones, were not initially recruited as soldiers to this battalion and therefore were not previously experienced in commanding a mixed-gender battalion. As a result, commanders experience a learning curve and, inspired by their senior commanders, gain experience and develop suitable work rules. Following is one example :

The integration of women and men is the battalion's strong point – clear and simple. Integration, with the right preparation by commanders, results in a realization of the abilities of both genders. Mental strength – women. Physical strength and bearing weights – men. It's a winning combination. Does it cause headaches to the commander – of course! Each one and their own angle, sensitivity, tears... I learned to love this battalion [Deputy Company Commander].

The senior command possesses an in-depth knowledge of these issues, and instructs and guides junior commanders, while explaining that a wise and experienced commander in an MGU should be able to fully utilize the capabilities of both genders. Thus, for instance, a commander will clear more time on his schedule for conversations with female combat soldiers. They ask for explanations and are not afraid to discuss and debate matters:

Always, in every task, it is important to think not only about one side but about both sides. On the feminine side it's important to be a bit more sensitive than with the men. I began my military service in a reconnaissance battalion of an infantry brigade, where there was a very clear, very harsh way of expressing oneself, which if used here towards a girl would sound very strange. So to a certain extent I changed here, not only in the way I express myself, but it also affected my way of thinking. I learned to contain problems, to accept criticism, and if there are things that bother me, then to talk about them [company commander].

Military leadership in the mixed-gender battalion very clearly understands the physical and psychological aspects of training female combatants, and a skilled commander will adjust his physical development program to avoid excessively fast physical wear. Furthermore, the skilled commander possesses rhetoric skills and maturity. He will not be deterred by a crying female combatant and will be able to detect signs of serious physical distress.

Moreover, the military leadership in the mixed-gender battalion is required to cope with two further important issues : constant comparisons to other combat units, and romantic relations in the unit. The first becomes clear in the sense of aimlessness among some of the boys who compare their roles to that of boys serving in battalions in regular brigades. They are unsatisfied with the status of the mixed-gender battalion compared to other infantry brigades. This becomes especially obvious when soldiers are exposed to insults and affronts following combat situations in which infantry brigades have taken part, leading to a sense of aimlessness in the battalion, especially among boys. The senior commanders instruct their subordinates not to ignore these emotions and to explain the logic behind the establishment of the MGU and its contribution to the overall military effort. Normally this type of frustration is characteristic of soldiers who are yet to socially integrate into the unit :

The [male] combatant in the battalion feels... that the battalion exists so that girls can be combatants. They are of a high standard, but they don't carry loads. We are here to be porters. We want to be real combatants, let us get out of here [conversation with combatants].

The second matter is that of romantic relations developing in the units, an issue which needs to be recognized and addressed, as there is no way to stop it. The understanding among commanders is that this matter should not be ignored, but rather identified in advance, addressed, and openly discussed:

There is a policy in place that is intended to avoid affecting operations. In case of uncertainty, the commanders are those who make the rosters. When there is tension between two people, they will not be sent to night reconnaissance missions together. In some cases, two male and female soldiers approach the commander and inform him that something is developing between them. According to policy, the commander decides on separation, and dictates who needs to be moved to another platoon or another company and when. These are things that can be solved at the battalion level, without affecting operations. These cases are pretty rare, as many have boyfriends or girlfriends at home or in other places in the Army [company commander, 2017].

Division of labour. All combat units have a division of labour between combatants, based on various parameters such as self-control, sense of humour, physical strength, navigation skills or personal leadership abilities. All these are also manifested in MGUs, gradually forming from basic training onwards. As the combatants mature, they ensure that the MGU functions “smoothly” and suitably, while relying on its internal division of labour.

The physics of capabilities and physical limitations can be managed wisely while overcoming obstacles, as of the training stages and onwards [combatant].

This issue has two clear expressions: the physical strength which normally characterizes the boys, and the internal discipline and thoroughness which is more characteristic of the girls. Some of these differences originate from the MGU’s recruiter who makes sure to recruit female combatants having relatively high motivational levels and cognitive abilities :

The physical skills of men (to equip, carry, and lift heavy equipment and munitions) are higher. The cognitive abilities and mental strength of women are higher – they show a high level of readiness even during long routine security missions. Moreover, they can be asked to take a bigger part in analyzing the operational challenge and providing creative solutions... Had I known this when I first started my post I would have made much fewer mistakes [company commander].

Even among our female interviewees it appears that this division of labour is achieved via a gradual process, resulting from the fact that soldiers spend a lot of time together and get to know one another. This is illustrated the following account :

Yes, there were all kinds of tensions, we had couples and on the other hand there were clashes, there were groups, there were boys who were great and there were those whom you don’t know where they came from, they didn’t connect with anyone. We just learned to know each other, we know everything about everyone. When you lie with someone in an ambush for anywhere between 4 hours to 5 or 10 days in the field, with no hygiene, you have a period, you have nothing to do. I for instance was in the field for 10 days with boys on the lookout. For ten days I didn’t shower, didn’t get back to the base. Now what about going to the toilet? You can’t wait for ten days... so you walk as far as you can. But I didn’t feel as if... it was fine, it was part of the routine. (Interviewer: And they also felt the same?) Yes, they would fart next to us, pee, everything was fine, you talk about everything, about their girlfriends, about us, what we do on the weekend, what we do if we see this and that. We learned each other [female combatant].

It should be noted that these processes are not always described in favour of the unit, and our study also raised a number of examples of factors which delay the gradual development of cohesion in an MGU. In particular, we learned about commanders who do not believe in integration, combatants who will not give up their goal to be transferred to a more prestigious unit, or female and male soldiers who are unsuitable for combat roles but remain in the mixed-gender teams.

It is difficult to have comradeship between boys and girls, especially because they don't go to sleep or shower together. Immediately after training, already in basic training, during free time, when everyone reaches the moment in which they can relax a bit and act just like they really are – then the boys go to their barracks and the girls to theirs, and they are separate [senior commander].

Screening processes and leadership development. When soldiers begin their military service, it is still unclear to what extent they will adapt to military life and successfully complete their service. This can also be seen in mixed-gender military service. When male or female soldiers are unable to adapt to combat service in the MGU, they normally complete their service track and move on to other places, usually the battalion command. This has a positive effect on the eventual division of labour in the operational unit, and furthermore has an added value in imparting the ability to accept the authority of a female commander:

There aren't very many boys in the battalion and those who are there don't necessarily want to be there, they are rejects from all kinds of basic training bases or people who refused to leave the recruits centre. So normally let's say there were 2-3 boys in the platoon, and, ahem... mostly they were embittered, were always trying to get sick leave, to dump us, some would also succeed in leaving, and those who didn't leave would stay with us and really respect us and help us [markswoman].

At an early stage I can say that recruits had a hard time accepting that a woman would command them. Later on at the operational companies it really didn't matter because there it's much freer and friendlier and familial and you realize that you can trust whomever was appointed to command you and you can and need to respect them [female combat soldier].

Another central process often raised during the study is leadership development. For women this includes not only the challenges of an officers' course in an infantry specialization but also the glass ceiling of reaching command positions beyond the rank of company commander. When female commanders develop from within the battalion and attain a senior position they are considered "living legends" and an object of admiration.

The disadvantage of the battalion – its inability to produce commanders from within its lines. It's an insult to the battalions. 2 cadets were dismissed at the Gefen [An infantry company, IDF officer school] for physical strain, medical [platoon commander].

Discussion

The academic literature on the integration of women in the military raises the argument by which armies that are under threat or that have a severe shortage of resources tend to positively consider the integration of women in aid and support positions, as well as in combat roles, despite the presence of various barriers to such integration.⁷ Such a situation developed in Israel, and over time women have been integrated into combat roles

⁷ Goldstein, 2001 ; DeLance, 2016.

based on various parameters such as risk or cultural scenarios of the war situation (Topel, 2010). One of the most frequent patterns of this type of integration can be seen in operational MGUs situated in border areas defined as having a “low” threat level. The current study has examined collective action by female and male soldiers in such combat MGUs. The study has been based on a combination of information sources enabling the characterization of organizational processes in the operations of MGUs. Based on this information, we propose a research approach that focuses on daily organizational processes that enable the operation of an MGU. We propose these processes as an alternative to mainstream discussions in the literature dealing with issues such as barriers to the integration of women into military units or the reproduction of the marginal status of women in armies.⁸ We argue furthermore that these processes enable the establishment of an efficient integrated unit. Such processes are not identical to what King (2013, 2015) referred to as military professionalism being a prerequisite for the successful collective service of women and men in combat units. Moreover, the identification of such organizational processes enables the identification of social and organizational roles in an MGU which may promote or deter effective collective action. One of the products of such integration is the training of female and male commanders who may convert such professional knowledge into social mobility, thereby leading to the repositioning of women in the military organization and not only to a reproduction of the existing situation.

Collective Service in “Institutionalized” Units

It seems that the above findings point to a social reality in the examined units which may be described as that of “institutionalized” operational units, meaning units which are no longer in their “experimental” state (Ben-Ari *et al.*, 2010), but that now include regulated organizational processes. An expression of this was the fact that commanders referred to the unit as experienced and that soldiers did not exhibit misgivings or misunderstandings regarding their border mission. This in comparison to other units positioned at the border area for a short period of time. A study on military units situated at border areas requires studying the unique operational logic that is prevalent at the border and which may be contradictory and hazy.⁹ In our study we found that this type of confusion was not prevalent in the units that we examined. If anything, a sense of lack of logic was found among combat units positioned at the border for a short period of time. Soldiers serving in this type of unit expressed the gaps reported in the literature between tasks having different military logic.¹⁰ According to the previous finding, the soldiers serving in these units described their mixed-gender service as a routine matter and not as something to be discussed or complained about.¹¹ This finding is important in view of the vivid debate in Israeli society on the question of whether such mixed-gender service is even possible. Should mixed service of female and male soldiers in combat units be

⁸ Sasson-Levy & Amtram-Katz, 2003.

⁹ Ben-Zeev & Gazit, 2016.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Sasson-Levy & Amtram-Katz, 2007, p.130.

encouraged? Should women be encouraged to serve in combat roles? The finding is also contrasted to arguments raised in the past regarding the IDF's image as a masculine, hegemonic and segregating organization. This may possibly provide evidence of a very fast change process. When Ben-Ari and Levi-Shreiber (2001) investigated this topic, they wrote :

In the army, versions of masculinity which are similar to civil works and forms of femininity which are based on the division of labor in the family are subordinated to the ideal of the warrior. In other words, the ideal of the warrior is the hegemonic masculinity [Ben-Ari & Levi-Shreiber, 2001, p.129].

In contrast to the position taken by Ben-Ari and Levi-Shreiber, in our study we found a different situation in the MGUs. While the battalion personnel are well aware of the existence of a hierarchy between combat units, their treatment of the matter does not directly address the dictates of this hierarchy, but rather is impressed upon a process in which the male soldiers learn to get to know the female soldiers and accept the role given to them. This process in fact includes not only matching expectations on the personal level, but also the rejection of female and male soldiers who are unsuitable for combat, and their transfer to support roles. It appears that the adoption of an ethnographic research method in this case has allowed us to point to processes which bring forth such a situation and to describe it as part of a micro-sociological approach (Collins, 1988). Moreover, it appears that a substantial part of the debate on mixed-gender military service focuses on the attributes of "women" and "men" but has no substantial connection to daily operational reality as experienced by soldiers and commanders at the units. It seems that an efficient mixed-gender unit is one that has learned to operate in an integrated manner. Normally, the combatants and commanders in such units do not often ponder the issue of gender integration but rather the achievement of their goals while accepting the gender mix as a given.

Microsociology and Cohesiveness in Mixed-Gender Units

According to King (2013*b*), cohesion in a combat unit is based on the professional ability of its combatants and commanders and not on the comradeship. This argument focuses on the prowess of female and male members who are above all professionals. Such viewpoint seems suitable to professional armies characterized by long-term service but less to armies that are based on mandatory service such as the IDF. Hence, the operational ability of an MGU is impressed upon the system of preparations for combat and especially on high quality professional training – and maybe even a uniform one for both men and women. This argument has not been affirmed in the current study, probably in light of the fact that a high operational level in an MGU is primarily based on the ongoing study of the differences between men and women and the resulting allowances. Presumably, an MGU functions well following a comprehensive effort by the military system, which invests extensive resources in the unit's organization and in learning what is needed for its participants. In fact, the academic literature in this field provides extensive information accumulated over many years by medical personnel, organizational consultants, and

commanders who coped with problems and issues and gradually accumulated a body of professional knowledge which was essential for addressing these issues. There is, for instance, substantial evidence from the literature dealing with the health of female combatants and the need for a gradual utilization of equipment and training. The data covers areas such as suitable nutrition for such units, suitable medical screening, and compatibility of the weapons and equipment (Epstein *et al.*, 2015). However, we are not dealing with these aspects, but rather with the social and leadership context, from an understanding of the important contribution of daily processes to the efficient operation of an MGU.

This study points to the following factors : leadership, division of labour, and internal screening processes. While a military organization needs to be formally organized according to well-defined rules and a professional combat doctrine, the everyday operation within its units and the attendant daily social processes are equally important. In this regard, the arguments raised by King (2013) on the preferability of professional training as a factor that promotes cohesiveness and collective action by men and women are not completely accurate. Effective collective action is not only a result of a uniform formal professional system for men and women, but is established through local learning processes and accumulated personal experience. Such ongoing processes have a substantial impact on the functioning of MGUs and result in a process in which the mixed-gender operational unit consolidates, while ejecting from it those who are unsuitable to serve in it. This process eventually culminates in the establishment of a reality in which the differences between men and women do not produce tension that needs to be managed to prevent it from undermining the unit's operation or cohesiveness,¹² but which constitutes a fundamental condition that requires no discussion. This condition is a result of organizational processes enabling the collective action of men and women.

Further Study and Limitations

In Israel's border areas, women have been successfully carrying out operational roles and operating well together with men. This fact does not override arguments regarding the reproduction of the social structure of armies, in which women are always marginal (Goldstein, 2001). Our research has focused on unique case studies and it is clear that the results are not representative of wider views in the IDF. In addition, the IDF is a citizen soldier army and more evidence is required to allow any deduction for other professional militaries. Paradoxically, the remoteness of the border area facilitates the creation of a "bubble" in the form of a battalion where mixed-gender operations are perceived as a natural situation. This is the result of a range of organizational processes taking place at the unit, as part of an overall effort to cope with gender integration. In any case, outside of these units, the pace of integration of women into combat roles is much slower. An in-depth understanding of these processes enables the military sociologist to form a more precise viewpoint on military units and their cohesiveness. It should be emphasized that the

¹² Lomsky-Feder & Ben-Ari, 2013.

purpose of the current study has not been to determine whether gender integration is good or bad, but to try to clarify how it works. We find that the selected research method helps to illuminate an important topic which is normally difficult to address, in view of the shortage of field studies in this area and the very extensive body of studies focusing on the macro level.

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