



# Accepted as Soldiers? Exploring Female Identity Performance and Whistleblowing Dynamics in the Norwegian Army

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the negotiation and performance of female social identities within the Norwegian Army, drawing on eight qualitative in-depth interviews with female soldiers. Using Goffman's concept of identity performance, the study examines how these women adapt their behavior and expectations to conform to the normative soldier role. One important finding of the study is the potential impact of identity negotiation processes on the silencing of women soldiers' voices, particularly when it comes to reporting misconduct or unethical behavior. By exploring how their identities are shaped within their institutional setting, the study complements our existing knowledge of how mechanisms of identity formation can contribute to the suppression of women soldiers' voices. Moreover, the study suggests that understanding female identity performance and negotiations in the military is crucial for contextualizing and comprehending the potential discouragement of whistleblowing activities. It identifies the concept of identity performance as a valuable theoretical framework for understanding the shaping of women soldiers' identities and the dynamic of whistleblowing activities within institutional contexts like the military.

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Military service is legally available to women on equal terms as men in several Western democracies (Carreiras, 2006; Doan & Portillo, 2016; King, 2013; Mota et al., 2018; Muhr & Sløk-Andersen, 2017; Reis & Menezes, 2020; Winslow & Dunn, 2002). However, studies have found that the prevailing image of a soldier<sup>1</sup> remains masculine (Alchin et al., 2018; Boldry et al., 2001; Do & Samuels, 2021), and that soldiers can be socialized into sexist attitudes and behavior within the military (Gibbons & Rossi, 2022). Furthermore, integrating women into the military structurally does not automatically change these norms (Carreiras, 2006; Collins-Dogruel & Ulrich, 2018; Ette, 2013; Higate, 2003; King, 2015; Kvarving, 2019; Pendlebury, 2020; Welland, 2010). The persistence of the masculine normative ideal makes it difficult for individuals who are perceived or identify as feminine<sup>2</sup> to fully identify and become soldiers (Muhr & Sløk-Andersen, 2017; Reis & Menezes, 2020; Wilen & Heinecken, 2018). Research has shown that women often have to conform to masculine norms (Brownson, 2014; Desan, 2019; Dunn, 2015; Harvey, 2023; Sløk-Andersen, 2018), compensate for perceived differences (King, 2015; Nilsson, 2018), present themselves as “like men” to be accepted as authentic soldiers (Füssel, 2018; Mota et al., 2018; Sasson-Levy, 2003). As such, women are expected to align themselves in ways resembling a masculine soldier image to be accepted.

Women socializing into the soldier role in military institutions may face negative aspects of masculine culture (Koeszegi et al., 2014), limited career opportunities, unwanted sexual attention, and higher rates of sexual harassment, bullying, and condescending attitudes compared to men (Bjerke & Rones, 2017; Fasting et al., 2023; Koeszegi et al., 2014; Lilleaas & Ellingsen, 2014; Mota et al., 2018; Muhr & Sløk-Andersen, 2017; Steder, 2010). Studies have found that women in the military often downplay and minimize sexual harassment (Fasting et al., 2023; Reis & Menezes, 2020; Sasson-Levy, 2003) and choose not to speak out due to fear of negative consequences (Deschamps, 2015; Flynn et al., 2019). They may avoid speaking up to maintain a positive atmosphere or out of fear of being perceived as killjoys (Sløk-Andersen, 2018, p. 214), or because they believe that reporting will not effectively resolve the situation (Fasting et al., 2023; see also Near et al., 2004).

Recently, there has been an increased focus on the issue of sexual harassment and assault against women in the military (Lanchbury et al., 2021; Liebermann et al., 2022; Matthews et al., 2021), including in Norway (Fasting et al., 2021; Fasting et al., 2023; Ringen et al., 2022; Rones et al., 2020; Skille, Svendsen, et al., 2022). The Norwegian Chief of Defense responded by suggesting that instances of harassment and assault in the military are individual problems rather than cultural issues within the Norwegian Armed Forces (Kristoffersen, 2022), a claim also made by the previous Chief of Defense (Eide, 2019). However, research has shown that issues of bullying and sexual harassment are particularly prevalent in the Army, compared to the Navy or Air Force, within the Norwegian Armed Forces (Hanson et al., 2017).

Research has identified that women in the military experience inequalities, leading them to adjust their identity performance to conform to a masculine norm for acceptance (e.g., Mota et al., 2018; Sasson-Levy, 2003; Sløk-Andersen, 2018). However, despite these pressures, many women choose to speak out against unethical and unlawful behavior. Research indicates that women who engaged in whistleblowing activities in the military often face greater retaliation compared to men (Rehg et al., 2008). In Norway, some women who blew the whistle internally experienced that their reports were ignored and faced retaliation from their peers, which led them to expose the wrongdoing to the media (Skille et al., 2023; Skille, Higrav, et al., 2022; Svendsen et al., 2022; Svendsen et al., 2023). Nevertheless, it is important to note that many women opt to remain silent in the face of misconduct, as research on whistleblowing reveals that choosing not to speak out within organizations after witnessing or experiencing wrongdoing is common (Batolas et al., 2022).

While the probability of blowing the whistle on misconduct has been linked to social identity and the perceived power to influence a situation (Anvari et al., 2019, p. 41), the relationship between women soldiers' identity performance and whistleblowing activities in the military

1 The term “soldier” is used broadly here to cover all military positions in the armed forces.

2 The term “feminine” and “masculine” describe socio-cultural characteristics based on stereotypical gender traits. I use the terms “women” and “men” to describe socio-cultural gender, rather than the terms “female” and “male”, which refer to biological sex.

context has not yet been studied. This article examines whether and how processes of identity performance may impact women soldiers' decision to speak out within their military context. By exploring how women perform their identities as "soldiers" and "women" to be accepted as authentic soldiers, the study finds that attempts to address unethical behavior are often deemed inappropriate because their performance is evaluated based on normative conceptions of a "soldier". As these women adjust their performance to gain acceptance from their peers, they explicitly devalue what they perceive as feminine behavior. Viewing whistleblowing as reporting instances of unethical or unlawful behavior to internal or external channels (Vandekerckhove, 2016) to influence peers to cease the misconduct (Rehg et al., 2008), the study argues that these experiences may influence the decision of women to speak out and report such behavior within their military context. Thus, this article suggests that understanding identity performance can shed light on the challenges facing whistleblowers in such closed institutions as the military.

## NEGOTIATING AND PERFORMING IDENTITY IN THE MILITARY

In its simplest and most general terms, "identity" refers to what it means to be oneself (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 3). According to symbolic interactionism, however, who one is can vary over time and in different settings, and the process of becoming who you are is a constant process, created and communicated through social interactions (Berger, 1963; Blumer, 1969; Charon, 2001; Jenkins, 2008; Mead, 1934). This implies that individuals have multiple social identities, such as being a soldier, a woman, or a father, and that identity is not seen as a static possession but, rather, an ongoing function (Scott, 2015). This process takes place within specific contexts that provide the conditions for enacting one's identity (Craib, 1998). In society, these contexts are reflected in established categories of social identities: Goffman (1963) highlighted that "we lean on these anticipations that we have, transforming them into normative expectations, into righteously presented demands" (p.12). The military institution is widely recognized as a domain of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; 2005), one that reinforces and constructs masculine identities (Higate, 2003). Consequently, the normative expectations for the social identity of a soldier are typically heavily influenced by masculinity. Moreover, the military institution has been characterized as "greedy" (Coser, 1974) and "total" (Goffman, 1961a) due to its demands for loyalty from its members and the process of re-socializing individuals into new social roles.

Within institutions, individuals engage in negotiations of their identities through interactions with specific others (Goffman, 1961a; Scott, 2015). These negotiations establish the conditions or culturally prescribed understanding of what it means to embody a particular social identity, such as that of a soldier. The concept of role-performance (Goffman, 1961b) helps us understand how identities are enacted within these conditions. By adhering to culturally defined normative expectations associated with a specific social identity, individuals take on a role (Goffman, 1961b). However, to be recognized by others as authentic in that role, the performance of that identity must display coherency and appropriateness; this involves emphasizing certain aspects of one's identity while concealing others (Goffman, 1959) to demonstrate adherence to cultural norms and values (Scott, 2015, p. 78). Individuals act with an awareness of the normative expectations attached to their social identity, knowing that their performance is subjected to judgment by others who either accept or sanction their enactment (Goffman, 1959; Scott, 2015).

Erving Goffman (1963) introduced the concept of "stigma" to describe situations where an identity performance is deemed inappropriate and results in social sanctions by others. Such instances can lead to the discrediting or "spoiling" of a person's identity, as they are judged as belonging to "a less desirable kind" or even being "thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak" (Goffman, 1963, p. 12). He outlined three types of stigma: "abominations of the body"; "blemishes of individual character perceived as weak will, domineering or unnatural passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs, and dishonesty"; and stigma based on "race, nation, and religion" (p. 14). Given that individuals engage in multiple identities and may combine them in different situations throughout their lives and interact with their surroundings (Scott, 2015), there are various identities at play during a performance.

For women in the military, gender identity, recognized as a performative act (Butler, 1999; Connell, 1987; Goffman, 1977; Lorber & Farrell, 1991; West & Zimmerman, 1987), and soldier identity can both be seen as performances. Goffman's understanding of role and role performance aligns with the theorizations of gender as a doing and a performative act (Deutsch, 2007; West & Zimmerman, 1987, 2009). Both perspectives acknowledge that normative expectations are associated with the social identities that individuals perform and that these expectations are shaped and established through social negotiations. Individuals "do" or perform their identities while being aware that they can be judged (Goffman, 1959) or held accountable (West & Zimmerman, 1987) based on normative conceptions. Joining, and staying in, the military is generally a voluntary choice, allowing individuals to disengage from the soldier role as a social identity. However, concerning the sex category to which individuals are assigned, there is no complete "doing away with it" (West & Zimmerman, 2009, p. 117), only shifts in accountability as gender is redone through the rebuttal of established gender norms.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

This study utilized unstructured in-depth interviews with eight women who shared their perspectives and experiences in the military. The data were collected at the Norwegian Military Academy (NMA) during the fall of 2019 and winter of 2023. The participants were officer cadets with prior experience in the ranks before joining the NMA, and they self-identified as women. The purpose of the interviews was to gain insights into the participants' perceptions of their professional identity and their journey of becoming and being soldiers. The interviews were conducted in Norwegian, recorded, and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The duration of the interviews ranged from 60 to 110 minutes. The participants were between 20 and 23 years old and had served for one to three years in the enlisted ranks of the army before joining the NMA. None of them had been deployed to international operations. The interviews provided a platform for participants to share and reflect upon their personal experiences. Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the NMA, the Norwegian Defense University College, and the Norwegian Center for Research Data.

The collected data underwent thematic analysis following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved a systematic process of data-close coding of the interviews, using NVivo software for the initial analysis. The codes were then organized into overarching themes, and I continuously compared these themes with theoretical concepts and the original data to refine the analysis. When translating the quoted excerpts for this article, priority was given to capturing the meaning of the content (Crowther et al., 2017). To protect the participants' identities, pseudonyms were assigned to each interviewee, and context-sensitive strategies were employed, such as disguising names, locations, backgrounds, and other identifiable details, to ensure anonymity (Saunders et al., 2015). The women's perspectives and opinions presented in this study are based on their personal experiences in the Army, including mandatory service, working in the enlisted ranks, and their time at the NMA.

## WOMEN SOLDIERS' IDENTITY IN THE NORWEGIAN ARMY

This section presents the main findings regarding how these women perform their soldier identity within the Norwegian Army. The findings are categorized according to their experiences related to their female physique; their efforts to adapt to the soldier identity; and the resulting consequences of these experiences. These consequences include choosing to overlook unwanted and unethical behavior, modifying their aspirations, and adjusting their behavior within the military context.

### BEING A WOMAN IN THE ARMY

Based on their mandatory service, the experiences of women in the military reveal the prevalence of a masculine soldier ideal.

During the first few weeks of my mandatory service, some other girls couldn't put up with it and started crying when the boys said that they couldn't do this or that. They were made fun of by the boys. The girls didn't do that to each other. And then,

the boys would talk about it in the dormitory afterward, “She’s so vulnerable and so weak!” “What is she doing in the military?” “What do women do in the military!?” And I stood there and listened. (Bea)

All the women in the study described encountering condescending attitudes and behavior, often during their mandatory service. Some women compared their actual experiences to their initial expectations, which led them to believe that they would be treated equally to men in the military.

You get expectations from Instagram and social media, seeing girls in the military, it looks so nice and fun. I was very motivated to contribute and make a difference when I started, but I never got any responsibilities. I felt I wasn’t seen, and my sergeant behaved foolishly. All these little things resulted in me not liking it there. It sucked; my sergeant was very condescending. I dreamt about becoming a dog handler, that’s why I applied there, but the combination of no responsibilities and a condescending leader made me want to quit. (Anna)

While all women acknowledged facing condescension, not all of them interpreted their performances as demeaning. A few women perceived such comments as complements, indicating that they had met the normative expectations of women soldiers.

Sometimes they’d be like “Oh, I didn’t expect this from you because you’re a girl,” after I tell them that I like to walk with a heavy backpack, or when I manage well on an exercise “I didn’t expect that from you” because they didn’t think I look like I’m a person who’s good at carrying a heavy backpack, or they didn’t expect that they could count on me. There have been comments on my physique, but positive feedback in that they didn’t think they could expect something from me. I never experienced negative comments. (Pia)

Having the social identity of a woman, Pia describes being denied the expectation of her fulfilling the ideal soldier norm. But after showing others that she could meet some of these normative expectations, Pia received confirmatory comments she understood as positive. The majority of women, however, viewed comments like these as reflective of condescension based on their gender. They emphasized the constant need to prove themselves as competent soldiers in the eyes of their superiors when confronted with such attitudes and behavior.

That’s how it was during my mandatory service [having to prove you’re as good as the guys]. I and a guy had the same commanding position and when someone new arrived they always looked to him first. He was big, strong, and looked like a soldier. They gave him all the leadership tasks and responsibilities. But I was the one solving everything. Then, they’re like “Oh, you can do something,” and I got responsibilities. (Linnea)

Linnea’s account reflects the experience, common among these women, of having to demonstrate their worth and earn respect to be recognized as capable soldiers by others. Further, some of these women faced obstacles that prevented them from getting the opportunity to prove themselves. For example, Bea shares her experience of being denied the position she had applied for, citing the physical fitness requirement as the reason.

They placed me as a medic because then I wouldn’t have to carry so much extra. I wanted to be an anti-tank gunner, which is more physically demanding. The one other girl was placed as a machine gunner. She was stronger and more of a tomboy. She had applied to be a sniper, but they thought that position was too heavy for her. I think I would have been an awesome anti-tank gunner. It’s technically demanding which suits me perfectly. And you’re a team of two, so I think we would’ve solved it. (Bea)

Bea also highlights the influence of her gender in this situation by mentioning another woman in her troop who was similarly assigned a less physically demanding position than the one she had initially applied for.

All the women expressed concerns about the physical strength expectations in the Norwegian Military Academy. They acknowledge the necessity of physical tests at the NMA but raised issues regarding how these tests were conducted and argued that they favored men. The larger concern for most of these women, however, was the overall emphasis on physical fitness beyond just the official tests.

Often the debate is narrowed down to physical differences. And it's an important aspect because we're born unequal. As a woman, you're born with a worse starting point if you wish to enter the military, and men get greater results from each workout. So being a woman in the military means that you're working your ass off to arrive where everyone else begins. In my opinion, that says a lot about the women who stay in the military, and who continue to fight. (Emma)

Many women expressed the belief that the physical test requirements in the military favored men. While the initial test did not differentiate between men and women to achieve the highest score, subsequent scores did consider gender differences.

Take the medicine ball throw for instance, where you throw a ball that's 10 kg as far as you can. It's an advantage to be tall. I am 162 cm, and if you're 180 or 190 then you're going to throw better just because you're taller. And the standing long jump, my legs are short, so it requires a lot more for me to jump 245 cm. (Bea)

The women noted that considering average differences in height, it required more effort for many women to achieve the best results, which they found problematic. They also experienced normative expectations of physical performance different from those of the official test requirements, leading them to feel that they did not meet the expectations of physical performance in the opinions of others. The women shared their experiences of not being fully accepted despite meeting the physical requirements to enter the NMA.

Here at the NMA, it's harder to be a girl [than during compulsory service]. One thing is the physical tests, but those responsible for the physical training focus on *not* distinguishing between boys and girls. And then, as a girl, you must lift heavy before it is acknowledged – only when you lift like the strongest boys [is it acknowledged]. But there *is* a big difference! What's relatively good for a girl to lift is not considered as good for a boy, which means that if you just lift well for being a woman, then it's not acknowledged. (Mia)

Ina described a situation from the NMA where her physical fitness was deemed insufficient by her male peers, resulting in her being unable to practice and improve her skills with the machine gun.

We were out as a team carrying the machine gun. I hadn't carried it so I said I could take it. I walked with a slightly slower tempo and then one of the guys immediately said "No! We're switching, you take something else." You feel like a burden when you can't do the same [as men]. I can't be as fast, so maybe better someone else does it, but then I feel like I'm not contributing equally. But I don't even get to try? I want to take the machine gun, but I'm not allowed because I can't, and I can't learn because I don't get to try. (Ina)

Ina's situation presents an inherent contradiction: she is unable to practice carrying the machine gun because her male cadet peers deem her unfit, which ultimately prevents her from improving her skills in that area.

While a few women argued that meeting the physical requirements was sufficient, they also acknowledged and argued that women could compensate through other qualities.

Guys have an advantage. You must work more to pass the physical requirements. It's a physical difference you've got to accept and if you accept doing the work it's possible to pass the tests and then we can remove the physical dimension. And in today's operations, it's the brain that's important. To be different and think in your



way is gold. Being a girl in the military *can* be an advantage, but not if you think that you're inferior, then you won't be able to get to the level you desire, or if you follow the norm, then I think you've lost the battle. (Hanna)

Hanna emphasized that being different from the norm could be an asset for women and discouraged comparing oneself to the norm. However, like the other women, Hanna still found herself comparing to the norm of the masculine soldier and adjusting herself in other aspects.

## ADJUSTING THEIR SOLDIER IDENTITY

Hanna later reflects on how her perception of women changed during her time in the military, leading her to prioritize men. Recognizing this shift, she contemplates modifying her way of speaking to be accepted as a soldier.

My impression of women changed when I started here [at the NMA]. I've caught myself thinking that if I was to choose a battle buddy, I'd choose most of the guys before the girls. I think it relates to their voices. Guys' deeper voices have some sort of effect on me. As if I respect a deeper voice more. Because when girls have deeper voices, you've probably noticed this yourself, then I feel like, OK, I think like "that girl, she's got gumption." But most girls have high-pitched voices. Perhaps I need to work on talking with a darker voice and use my abdominal muscles to shift my voice one or two tones down. This can make a difference! It's something I can tell other women, because, like, it's how it is! If you just accept that, well, then you can do something about it! A girl can easily just talk in a lower pitch, to a certain degree at least, it's just about having the willpower. You can compare it with stuttering. Find a way to solve it! I think it's that attitude you've got to have toward most things, eh, either you solve it by altering yourself, or else you find a job that fits you. (Hanna)

In contrast, Hanna is overt about aligning herself with the privileged gender and participates in denigrating femininity when comparing her female voice in the military context to a speech disorder. Consequently, she seeks to masculinize herself by adapting her voice to conform to masculine norms.

One consequence of the women's experiences in the military was the adjustment of their behavior. This involved concealing aspects of their identity by choosing not to speak out against unwelcome behavior.

I recommend mandatory service to all women, but I also tell them to decide beforehand where they want to stand concerning comments and gawking, and how much of it they want to accept and tolerate. I'm just telling them how it is because if you throw a tantrum early on it's going to be difficult to get friends because you end up being "that girl," the one who doesn't tolerate anything. It's just a matter of time before someone does something that's not OK. I tolerated it a lot during my mandatory service. Laughed it off or ignored it to not create a bad mood. Perhaps more than I should have. But if you want to have friends among the employees in the military you have to tolerate that as a woman you get to hear stuff. (Bea)

Bea's experiences have caused her to refrain from speaking out against sexist behavior and caution other women about the potential consequences of being perceived as "that girl" if they express their discontent. For others, this entailed modifying their ambitions regarding mandatory service and their military career.

I've consciously considered branches, I feel so cowardly when I say this, I just wasn't eager to end up in the mechanized infantry. I've heard so much and experienced a bit, nothing too sick but I've noticed that if you're a girl you've got to prove that you're good enough before getting *any* respect. As a girl, it's not enough to achieve the minimum, you've got to be excellent to be accepted. It's the same here at the NMA. Some of those "badass guys," who've been sergeants for years in mechanized infantry units, just plow through. For the first six months, they didn't listen to a word I said. After being like "Hello! Hey! Here I am!" making good arguments, achieving things, and being critical about what they've said and done, they've started listening. (Linnea)

In addition to avoiding units where she may encounter condescending attitudes and negative interactions, Linnea also describes adjusting her behavior to conform to the soldier norm. This adjustment includes modifying her voice, which aligns with Hanna's suggestion that women can alter their voices toward a more masculine norm.

Furthermore, some women shared experiences of being corrected when engaging in activities stereotypically associated with women. Mia, for example, encountered such incidents with male instructors at the NMA.

It's hard to know how to behave in front of some men [here]. We had a school party and me and a girlfriend ended up in a discussion with one of the instructors who thought girls needed to think extra about how they behaved to be taken seriously as officers. That we girls do things together, that we go two and two together, in his eyes these were bad things, he said that girls should think about their behavior and how they are perceived. It can be difficult to face such attitudes. I talked with my friend about this later, and we were really surprised, and thought is this necessary to talk about here, and now? It was a coincidence that we were walking together, we were both going to get something before going to a place, and I'm not going to walk ahead of her just for the sake of it. But in this situation, I went to get my things while my friend continued to discuss with this guy, and when I wanted to go and get her because we were going to this place, I just started to walk alone and avoided going back because of what he had said. (Mia)

Reflecting on this, Mia expressed that this situation made her aware of a need to consider her behavior when in the presence of other women and under the observation of these instructors.

## CONSEQUENCES OF NORMATIVE EXPECTATIONS

Many of these women justified their altered ambitions by claiming they were "better suited" for alternative roles. Anna, for example, initially desired to be a dog handler in an infantry unit but changed her ambitions after her mandatory service.

I've chosen medical service as my branch now. It was either logistics, medical, or signal, not mechanized infantry. Not because I don't want to serve abroad, possibly having to kill someone, but because I felt the tasks suited me better. (Anna)

Whether explicit or not, altering their ambitions served as a way for these women to mitigate the risk of encountering condescending attitudes and similar challenges, allowing them to continue pursuing a career in the military. During their mandatory service, many of these women contemplated leaving due to their gender-related experiences. Additionally, they often felt a sense of inferiority when compared to their male colleagues.

It's easy to feel like a burden. Not that I'm *that* much of a burden but I'm not as strong [as the guys]. My fitness is good enough, but I think about not being equally strong which make me feel inferior. But in a way, no one can do anything about it. (Ina)

Being subject to comparison to highly masculine normative expectations and lacking support from similar others when attempting to renegotiate their role as soldiers led to negative feelings surrounding their role as soldiers for many of these women. The situation often caused conflicting emotions, as Ina notes above. For Linnea:

There're so many contradictions. Some are totally against women in the military, others are more neutral, and I don't know where I stand myself. Because I don't feel that I should get any advantages just because I'm a girl, but simultaneously, I can't manage to carry as heavy a load as the guys. I've got contradictory feelings about myself and my role in the military. I know that I must work out a lot harder and more than the guys. There are some given differences in what we can do. We could say that women should be excluded from combat positions, but then I feel that I get like, ah, I get furious! But, simultaneously, what counterarguments do I have if it's all about physical strength? (Linnea)



Interestingly, some of these women mentioned feeling advantaged if they did not have to carry heavy loads, as the men did. However, this advantage was not acknowledged for other important qualities, such as performance on longer exercises, caregiving abilities, multitasking, leadership, and organizational skills, which instead were recognized as varying between individuals.

Emma and Bea shared experiences where their attempts to address unwanted behavior were met with resistance and disapproval from others, highlighting the challenges they faced trying to correct such behavior.

For example, when I've done a great job as a platoon commander, I often get feedback from my supervisors. This and that was good because of this and that, and then at the end, they add "That's what's so great with you girls, you *know* how to do this and that!" I feel that they remove *everything* I've accomplished because they consider that I've managed it *because* I'm a girl and not because I'm Emma! And guys don't understand why it sucks to hear those comments. When I told the guys how it made me feel, the guys responded with "You can't complain about that!" and "He meant well!" (Emma)

Just before Emma's statement, she had discussed the challenges she faced in conveying care, compassion, and meeting the needs of others in her military environment, as these were areas where she felt less proficient. Despite her efforts, her accomplishments were dismissed by her supervisors who attributed them solely to her gender and innate nurturing qualities as a woman. In response, Emma sought to solidify and validate her success and to draw attention to the devaluation of her achievements by confronting her colleagues and negotiating the standards for acceptable behavior as a soldier. However, instead of receiving acknowledgment and validation from her male peers, they defended her supervisors, refusing to acknowledge the negative aspects of the situation and leaving Emma unsupported in her experience.

In addition to their efforts to address unethical behavior, some of these women also shared experiences of attempting to correct serious incidents. Bea's story exemplifies how such incidents could be disregarded by those around her.

There were several incidents and comments about sex from my colleagues, how women liked it rough and tough. And questions, if I had tried various sex toys and whether I wanted to try his sex toys. I made it clear that I wasn't interested, that I thought it was inappropriate to talk about this at work, and that I had no need to talk about my sex life or sex preferences with my colleagues. Our colleagues were always around, but they never, they didn't do anything. (Bea)

Bea recounts her efforts to address and correct the behavior she was facing, but she did not receive any support from her colleagues. Their silence when witnessing the sexual harassment Bea described can be seen as a form of acceptance of the behavior she was subjected to.

## DISCUSSION

After entering the military institution, the women in this study encountered condescending attitudes and behavior based on their gender. These experiences ranged from comments deeming their characteristics as "surprising" for a woman to instances of sexualized comments and harassment. However, to continue their military careers, these women made several changes to their behavior. These changes included concealing aspects of their identity by choosing not to speak out against unwanted and unethical behavior; adjusting their behavior to align with normative expectations; and altering their ambitions. These findings support previous research from other studies (such as Alchin et al., 2018; Bergman Rosamond & Kronsell, 2018; Brownson, 2014; Do & Samuels, 2021; Dunn, 2015; Fasting et al., 2023; Mota et al., 2018; Muhr & Sløk-Andersen, 2017; Sløk-Andersen, 2018), suggesting that the women participating in this study were socialized within their military context to conform to established masculine norms.

## WOMEN'S IDENTITY PERFORMANCE

The changes that these women describe having incorporated into their behavior should be understood as role performances (Goffman, 1961b). Upon entering the military institution, they

learned what behavior is considered appropriate for them as soldiers through interactions. This learning process involved observing certain others and engaging in negotiations where their performances were judged as either appropriate or inappropriate. Through these processes, the women acquired the culturally granted expectations of the soldier role, which they describe as resembling a masculine ideal.

Many of the interactions described by the women reflect their attempts to negotiate the prevailing soldier norms. These attempts included taking initiative in tasks and serving in positions perceived as more masculine, demonstrating equal skills to their male counterparts, and speaking out against behavior they deemed unacceptable. However, these attempts to redefine the soldier role were often met with sanctions from their peers and colleagues. They experienced various forms of sanctions, such as being denied access to physically demanding tasks or positions, facing condescending attitudes and behavior based on their gender, and having their efforts to correct unethical and unlawful behavior trivialized or ignored by similar others.

Such negative sanctions, described by Goffman (1963) as “stigmas,” communicate the inappropriateness of certain behaviors within the social identity of a soldier. These sanctions represent the normative expectations of what it means to be a soldier, prompting soldiers to adjust their behavior to align with these expectations and avoid being stigmatized themselves. The women in this study described having their attempts to negotiate what is considered appropriate for them as soldiers judged inappropriate and sanctioned by significant and similar others, predominantly men. Many of these others were their superiors or instructors, who they, as young cadets, looked up to and regarded as authentic and significant. When these “authentic” and significant others distanced themselves from the women’s attempts to negotiate and correct unwanted behavior, it resulted in the women feeling detached from the social identity they were striving to acquire as soldiers. Their identity as soldiers became “spoiled” (Goffman, 1963) in the eyes of others.

These women describe deviating from the normative expectations of the soldier role within their military context. These observations are based on their experiences of different forms of sanctions, sometimes subtly implied through silence and other times explicitly expressed. It is through these sanctions that these women become aware of the latent normative expectations embedded within the soldier role. When their attempts to redefine what is considered acceptable for a soldier are met with sanctions, these women describe facing a few options. They can choose to leave the military or alter their way of being. As Hanna put it: “Either you solve it by altering yourself, or else you find a job that fits you.”

By modifying their ambitions, these women aimed to demonstrate their conformity to the normative expectations of being a soldier, and sometimes also the expectations of being a woman soldier. This involved opting for positions that may be considered less masculine and, therefore, less likely to invite sanctions on their identity performance as soldiers and women. They had to continuously showcase excellence while enduring recurring debates questioning women’s participation in the military. Furthermore, recognizing that masculine characteristics were held in higher esteem, these women chose to mimic the masculine norm.

## IDENTITY PERFORMANCE AND WHISTLEBLOWING

The women’s decision to refrain from speaking out against unwanted behavior constitutes an important aspect of their performance. In their stories, these women described their unsuccessful attempts to address unwanted and unethical behavior, such as challenging the attribution of their success to their gender or speaking out against sexualized comments in the workplace. These attempts reflect their negotiation of what constitutes acceptable behavior for a soldier. Certain others in their military context, either explicitly or implicitly through their silence, sanctioned these attempts by defending the wrongdoers, thus indicating complicity. This finding aligns with previous studies documenting women’s experience and fear of the negative consequences of speaking out (Deschamps, 2015; Flynn et al., 2019; Sløk-Andersen, 2018).

For most of the women in the study, socialization into the soldier role involved accepting various forms of mistreatment, including harassment, condescending attitudes, being underestimated, overlooked, and having their voices ignored (see also Fasting et al., 2023; Muhr & Sløk-Andersen, 2017; Reis & Menezes, 2020). Similar to the finding of Sløk-Andersen (2018), the women in this

study expressed a shared understanding that it was crucial to avoid being perceived as “that girl” to be accepted as a soldier. For many of the women in this study, this meant personally managing the consequences of their gender. In other words, conforming to the normative expectations of being a soldier necessitated accepting a certain degree of unethical behavior as a woman soldier.

While the women in these stories are judged inappropriate, the meaning of these interactions extends to all soldiers within their broader military context. Others learn from these situations, observing what behaviors are accepted or sanctioned, and they carry these experiences into future interactions. They continue to negotiate the soldier’s identity through ongoing interactions, where similar others continue to accept and sanction certain types of behavior. None of the women in this study described instances of receiving support when they raised their voices to address unwanted situations. This implies that not only do these women anticipate and expect unwanted situations to be accepted, but the broader audience in such situations also holds this expectation. This is particularly evident when members of the military institution learn from individuals who are responsible for the misconduct, including superiors, instructors, or supervisors. Having been socialized within a culture, where speaking out against unethical behavior leads to being perceived as a less desirable type of soldier, these women chose to conceal their opinions when subjected to unwanted, unethical, and unlawful behavior.

In the context of this study, the process of attaining the social identity of a soldier involved, for women, enduring and reluctantly accepting unethical and unlawful attitudes and behavior. It is important to recognize their efforts to speak up against misconduct as attempts to negotiate and actively contribute to the construction of the soldier’s identity. However, these attempts were met with punitive measures, leaving these women powerless to change the situation. To assume the social identity of a soldier, these women had to adapt and modify their behavior accordingly. Consequently, these identity negotiations resulted in their voices being silenced, disqualifying those who protested against the prevailing circumstances, and isolating and excluding them from being recognized as active participants and shapers of identities within the military institution. This further perpetuates their marginalization.

Batolas et al. (2022) suggest that the likelihood of reporting misconduct is influenced by both psychological and hierarchical closeness to the perpetrator. In the context of the Norwegian Army, which is known for its relatively non-hierarchical structure compared to other military institutions, factors such as the army’s size and cultural attributes may foster friendships across ranks and contribute to closeness. Working closely with peers and superiors in such an environment, often referred to as a “total institution,” may, then, decrease the likelihood of misconduct being reported.

The findings of this study suggest that women in the military do face significant challenges when it comes to engaging in whistleblowing activities related to unethical and unlawful attitudes and behavior to which they find themselves subjected on account of their gender. They often find themselves in a vulnerable position, as their superiors, who are frequently the perpetrators of such misconduct, take part in creating a hostile environment sanctioning their attempts to address misconduct. The experiences of these women also have a broader impact on the soldier population, as interactions shape the established norms within the military. Consequently, whistleblowing activities may be perceived as discouraged by all soldiers, based on the observed experience they have. As a result, the military institution becomes complicit in denigrating femininity by silently accepting different types of unethical behavior, making it difficult to blow the whistle on such behavior against women soldiers. Consequently, the military ends up stigmatizing women soldiers.

## CONCLUSION

This study provides insights into the negotiation of female social identities within the Norwegian Army. The study reveals that these women experienced stigmatization based on their gender, with their feminine bodies and characteristics being deemed unfit and weak in a military culture that predominantly values masculinity. The women described how their identity performances were influenced by the acceptance or discouragement they received from significant others in their military environment. Their attempts to address unethical behavior were repeatedly

sanctioned, resulting in the silencing of their voices. To be recognized as authentic soldiers and to pursue a career in the military, the women felt compelled to adjust their behavior and conceal their reactions to unacceptable behavior.

These performative aspects of female identity in the military, where women adjust their behavior to avoid sanctions, reveal potential obstacles and challenges to whistleblowing activities. It suggests that whistleblowing activities may be discouraged for all soldiers as they negotiate and internalize the normative expectations associated with the soldier's role in their military context. This underscores the importance of considering identity performance as a valuable concept for comprehending the shaping of women soldiers' identities in institutions such as the military. This is a significant challenge for the military; disregarding these attempts to negotiate into a culture of accountability and ethical behavior implies complicity in a devaluation of equality.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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