Military historian John Keegan argues that “warfare is . . . the one human activity from which women, with the most significant exceptions, have always and everywhere stood apart.” Joshua Goldstein maintains that there is no human endeavor that is more gendered than war and that despite a few mythical examples of women serving in Amazonian type units, the military is a striking example of cross-cultural consistency with respect to gender: men fight and women stay home.

National military organizations are quintessentially masculine constructs that rely on notions of men as warrior-protectors and women as the protected. They are constructed along a patriarchal hierarchy with commanders (“old men”) leading small to large units (“bands of brothers”) whose mission is to protect the homeland in the name of “national defense.” The prototypical warrior is a large, physically strong, stoic man who embodies notions of physical courage, honor and self-sacrifice and euphemistically stands as a protective barrier in front of the nation. The feminine identity exists in stark contrast and direct opposition to the masculine identity. National militaries are set up to optimize men’s participation and rely on patriarchal social structures where women perform traditional family duties centered around caregiving while men go to war, raising the men’s families and supporting the organization through the exploitation of their free labor. Within this conception, there is no room or accommodation for women who want to join national militaries. The result is that when women have joined, they have generally been confined to support roles, are rarely the focus of recruiting efforts, are not promoted at the same rate as men and suffer from marginalization, discrimination and harassment. Although many progressive-sounding political statements have been made, some by member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and NATO partners, recognizing the importance of increasing the number of women in national forces “to enhance operational effectiveness and success,” most military organizations remain bastions of men who are highly resistant to the inclusion of women.
As a result, opportunities to effectively address conflict and respond to crises by understanding and engaging the entire population are overlooked, making military responses less than optimal. This became glaringly obvious during the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, when extreme gender-based cultural norms – on all sides – prevented international, male-dominated forces from interacting with local women. Not only were the women of Iraq and Afghanistan prohibited from interacting with men from outside their family units, but international forces practiced limited or outrightly prohibited women’s participation in their formations; this made it nearly impossible to interact effectively with half of the population in the areas of operations. After several frustrating years, military adaptations occurred in these conflicts in the form of Lioness, Female Engagement and Cultural Support Teams. Military necessity drove changes to existing all-male combat units that required the presence of women in uniform.

Adaptation – driven by necessity – is one of the principal forces behind the evolution of military policy on the formal inclusion of women in the 20th and 21st centuries.

This chapter focuses on women’s participation in state-sponsored national militaries. I do not examine women’s involvement in other security forces and armed groups, including police, gendarmeries and guerilla and insurgent groups. In some instances, women’s inclusion in non-traditional, insurgent groups has moved more quickly than in state-sponsored security forces. Perhaps the most comprehensive use of women in armed groups has occurred in insurgent groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), where women comprised an estimated 40 percent of insurgent forces. But even in such instances, women are often assigned administrative, medical, communication and logistic duties. Many of the dynamics we see in national military organizations also apply to non-national military forces. I also do not address the issue of integrating gender perspectives into conflict analyses and military operations. Military organizations around the globe have made little or no progress in adopting gender perspectives in their analyses and operations.

This chapter focuses on the integration of women soldiers in national military organizations and operations. I first provide an overview of women in the military globally. Second, through a case study of the United States (US) military, I examine drivers of progress that have helped to increase the number of women in the military and identify obstacles to the integration of women in the military. I conclude by identifying successful strategies for increasing women’s participation in national military organizations.

Women’s participation: the track record

Historically, if women wanted to be part of formal military organizations, they did so by disguising themselves as men. History is replete with examples. Rosalind Miles and Robin Cross have documented women warriors on ancient and modern battlefields. They report that, before 1840, there were at least 119 documented cases.
of women – disguised as men – serving in the Dutch military. In the US Civil War (1861–1865), there were more than 400 documented cases of women serving while disguised as men. Women who were not prepared to disguise themselves as men, but were committed to war efforts, did so informally and in the shadows as saboteurs, scouts, couriers and spies. Women who served openly performed traditional roles – as nurses and caregivers, cooks and laundresses. When wars ended, women were often sent home; few were recognized for their service, and even fewer received any military compensation.

It is not until World War I that women were accepted “into uniform.” The enormous loss and sheer demand for male recruits during World War I drove political leaders to consider using women in military roles. The United States began to enlist women in the Naval reserves, where they served as yeomen and performed a wide range of clerical, communications and recruiting duties. Eventually, more than 12,500 women served as “yeomanettes.” The US Army and US Navy created a Nurse Corps, where 34,000 women served by war’s end. Even larger demands on European forces resulted in 80,000 women serving in the British military as non-combatants. The most extensive use of women in uniform occurred in Russia, where extreme casualty levels had exhausted the supply of male recruits. In addition to women serving in traditional roles, Russia took the unprecedented step of deploying approximately 6,000 women as combatants. These women served in sex-segregated battalions, the most famous of which was the Battalion of Death. These units were disbanded by the new Bolshevik government after the war. Indeed, at the end of the war, women from all countries were universally discharged and expected to return to their homes and resume traditional family roles.

World War II was the second major milestone in the inclusion of women in military organizations in the 20th century. As in World War I, the demand for male recruits forced political and military leaders to look for additional sources of manpower. Fortuitously, many women were showing up at recruiting stations demanding to enlist to defend their homelands. In the United States, Great Britain and Germany, women were limited to non-combat duties with one exception: British women manned anti-aircraft batteries, where they performed every duty in the battery except one. They could spot, set the range and bearing dials, adjust the fuses and load the guns, but they were not allowed to “pull the trigger on a man, even if he was a Luftwaffe pilot.”

The only nation to use women as traditional combatants during World War II was the Soviet Union. More than 820,000 Soviet women served in both combatant and non-combatant roles in the war, and at least half of them served on the front lines. Soviet women reported to recruiting stations early in the war and demanded to serve in military units. These women participated in extended combat operations, served in the infantry as machine gunners, mortarmen and snipers, as well as in other ground combat roles. The Soviet Union was the first country to allow women to fly combat missions, and by war’s end, Soviet women had flown more than 30,000 combat sorties. In total, 90 Soviet women from across the military branches received the Hero of the Soviet Union award, the highest military
honor given to any soldier during the war.¹⁴ When the war was over, these women were largely pushed out of the military and told that their new duty was to return home to repopulate the homeland.¹⁵

The full scope of Soviet women’s participation and their stories went unrecognized for decades. Only in the 21st century have researchers such as Svetlana Alexievich, Anna Krylova and Reina Pennington been able to conduct research in Soviet archives and publish their interviews with these hidden women combatants.¹⁶

After World War II, women began to make permanent inroads into military organizations. In the United States, women petitioned the government to remain in service, and in 1948, for the first time and by an act of Congress, women were allowed to serve in the peacetime military. Their numbers and the scope of their service were severely limited by laws and policies. They were capped at two percent of the total force; women officers could not be promoted beyond the rank of colonel, and they could not command men. If they married, their spouse was denied benefits, and if they had children they were discharged.¹⁷ It was only in 1967 that the cap was lifted and women could be promoted to flag officer ranks.

Perhaps the most robust use of women in military organizations since World War II has been in Israel. During Israel’s War of Independence and later in the newly formed Israeli Defense Force (IDF), single and married women without children were conscripted alongside men, although they were limited to non-combat jobs. Eventually, demand and legal challenges would open most combat occupations in the IDF to Israeli women, although some units have remained closed. Military service through conscription remains a civic duty in Israel, and it has resulted in Israel having the largest percentage of women serving in the military of any country in the world. Almost half of the IDF is comprised of women.¹⁸

The entry of women in military organizations has also been driven by the United Nations (UN). United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 (2000) and subsequent Women, Peace and Security (WPS) resolutions recognized the importance of women’s equal participation in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security and called on UN member states to increase women’s participation in security organizations and peace processes. Governments regularly make statements expressing support for gender equality and for increasing the number of women in peacekeeping operations. In 2017, Canada launched the Elsie Initiative on Women in Peace Operations to address the obstacles to deploying more women in peace operations. In 2018, the UN Secretary-General launched the Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) initiative, which included commitments, signed by the majority of UN member states, to increase “the number of civilian and uniformed women in peacekeeping at all levels and in key positions” and to “systematically integrate a gender perspective into all stages of analysis, planning, implementation and reporting.”¹⁹ In 2019, the UN Secretary-General issued a gender parity strategy for UN peacekeeping operations. This initiative sets a target of deploying 15 percent uniformed women in UN peace operations by 2028.²⁰ That would be an increase of more than 11 percent. In the
2010s, the number of deployed uniformed female peacekeepers in UN operations has hovered around three to four percent.

NATO has also recognized that “the integration of gender and the inclusion of women’s voices in all aspects of NATO’s work is an essential factor in the success of peace and security.”\(^{21}\) NATO has committed to increasing the number of women in its operations and has called on its member states and partners to increase the number of women in their national military organizations.\(^{22}\) NATO was an early adopter of the WPS agenda and has released WPS policy and action plans since 2007.

Despite these commitments and calls for action, women remain a minority group in all national militaries. Only a few countries, including Canada, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Australia and the United States, allow women equal access to all military occupations. Integration of women in the military most often occurs because of military and operational necessity. In addition, organizations are pressured by women who resent discrimination based on gender and challenge their exclusion through political and legal means.\(^{23}\) In most instances, change is strongly resisted by military leadership.

### TABLE 5.1 Women as a Percentage of the Total Force

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Percent Women</th>
<th>Conscription</th>
<th>Restrictions on Women’s Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Israel(^1)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes, men and women</td>
<td>Some restrictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa(^2)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Some restrictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary(^3)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No restrictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moldova(^*)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Yes, men only</td>
<td>No restrictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia(^*)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No restrictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States(^4)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No restrictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada(^*)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No restrictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France(^*)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No restrictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway(^*)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Yes, men and women</td>
<td>No restrictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia(^*)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Restrictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden(^*)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Yes, men and women</td>
<td>No restrictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China(^6)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Yes, men only</td>
<td>Restrictions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sources:**\(^1\) Information received from the Public Diplomacy Office of the IDF (January 27, 2020). It may be noted that only 10 percent of officers in the rank of Colonel are women.\(^2\) Nina Wilen and Lindy Heinecken, “Regendering the South African Army: Inclusion, Reversal and Displacement.” *Gender Work Organ* (2018), pp. 1–17;\(^3\) Hungary reports the highest percentage of women in the military of all NATO member and partner nations;\(^4\) Service Women’s Action Network (SWAN), *Women in the Military: Where They Stand*, 10th ed. (Washington, DC: SWAN, 2019);\(^5\) International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2002–2003* (London: IISS);\(^6\) Elsa Kania and Kenneth Allen, *Holding Up Half the Sky?: The Evolution of Women’s Roles in the PLA*, Part 2 (Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, October 26, 2016).\(^*\) Data for NATO member and partner nations was drawn from the 2017 *Summary of the National Reports of NATO Member and Partner Nations* submitted to the NATO Committee on Gender Perspectives. (Research on women in the military is hampered by limited data. Many countries do not report sex-disaggregated demographic data on their military forces.)
Case study: women in the US military

In 1991, as the first Gulf War came to a close, US servicewomen’s participation was noted by Congressional lawmakers. Approximately 41,000 women had been forward deployed, and despite policies that were designed to keep them out of combat, women were both killed and captured during the war. In 1992, the US Congress eliminated the last law that limited women’s military service to non-combat support roles. In 1993, then Secretary of Defense Les Aspin directed the military to open all combat aircraft and most combat ships to women. Women continued to be excluded from submarines. In 1994, in place of laws that had limited women’s service, the US Department of Defense established an institution-wide policy that officially banned women from assignment to more than 300,000 “direct ground combat” positions. Women could fight in the air and at sea but not on land. The policy further restricted women from being assigned to or co-located with all-male ground combat units even in supporting roles. The policy was put to a test less than ten years later.

In 2001, when the United States and allied countries invaded Afghanistan, women from support specialties were not allowed to be assigned to or co-located with all-male combat units. Although the US military had historically discriminated against women by limiting job and assignment opportunities, they had not violated laws or their own policies to do so. But by 2005, well into the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, military necessity drove change. US commanders on the ground began violating the co-location prohibition by devising creative ways to circumvent policies that limited their ability to use servicewomen on the front lines. Quietly and creatively, they violated official policies because senior leaders refused to address the untenable and deeply gendered nature of the policies themselves.

Commanders engaged in a game of semantics by “attaching” rather than “assigning” women to ground combat units when they needed them. They “attached” servicewomen who were Arab linguists, engineers, medics and explosive ordnance specialists to infantry companies when they needed translators, construction and medical support or demolition experts; “assigning” women to all-male combat units was prohibited by US Department of Defense (DOD) policy. Commanders sent small teams of servicewomen to work from forward operating bases and at combat outposts as Lionesses – servicewomen assigned to conduct searches of civilian women at checkpoints and during combat patrols – and as Female Engagement Teams – small teams of servicewomen (two to four women) assigned to combat units to interact with civilian women during military operations. Commanders intermittently shuttled servicewomen back to rear areas for short durations, sometimes just overnight, and returned them to forward-operating bases to avoid the appearance of violating co-location rules that prohibited women from being permanently co-located with combat units. But shuttling women to rear areas and “attaching” women to units were distinctions without practical differences that violated the intent of existing policies.

In 2006, two US Army colonels who were then students at the Army War College conducted a series of surveys and studies that documented the wide variations
that commanders used in interpreting the restrictive policies. In one survey, 70 percent of their War College classmates agreed that the policy needed to be revised, and 74 percent agreed that “all soldiers regardless of gender should be assigned to positions for which they are qualified.” They found that the “Combat Exclusion Policy with its attendant ‘co-location’ restriction was incompatible with the nature of the war in which the US Army was engaged and the forms of conflict it was likely to encounter in the future.” But in 2006, no official steps were taken to eliminate or modify this policy.

In 2012, six years after the War College study, US servicewomen – two of whom had been wounded in combat and decorated – filed two lawsuits that challenged their exclusion on legal grounds. In January 2013, the exclusion policy was rescinded. It took the US military three more years to “study” the feasibility of integrating women into ground combat units, although extensive studies had already been conducted by Canada before it opened its combat units to women. Even after studies found no compelling reason to keep any occupation closed to all women, the US Marine Corps requested an exemption to the new policy in order to continue to keep women out of its infantry formations. The request was denied, and in 2016 the US military reluctantly opened all occupations and units to women. Although formal directives to include qualified women were issued, the process has been slow and challenged by ongoing efforts to resist women’s inclusion.

**Drivers of progress**

The international track record and the US case study show that change is driven by a diverse set of factors, including national and international norm changes as expressed in national laws and policies and UN Security Council resolutions. In the case of the United States it is likely that it was a combination of changing social norms along with the extent and sustained use of women in combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan that cleared the path for full integration into the US military.

That said, the most effective arguments for increasing women’s participation in military organizations have not been based on notions of equality, fairness or merit – even in countries that hold these principles in high regard. For security professionals, the majority of whom are men, equality and fairness are secondary considerations when security is concerned. For them, the only legitimate reason for increasing women’s participation is a functional one. Political and military leaders must be convinced that women’s participation adds value by increasing military effectiveness.

UNSCR 1325 and subsequent resolutions have highlighted the role of women in peacekeeping operations. The United Nations (UN) has argued that participation of women in peace operations “contributes to the overall success of the mission by enhancing effectiveness, improving the mission’s image, access and credibility vis-à-vis the affected population, including by making UN peacekeepers more approachable to women.” The UN Secretary-General has noted that the presence of women has led to more credible protection responses and that women’s presence at checkpoints has promoted less-confrontational situations. The presence
of women also led to higher reporting of sexual and gender-based violence in conflict zones and lower incidence rates of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA).³²

Members of the US Special Operations Command Cultural Support Teams (CST) have argued that their participation enhanced mission effectiveness by 20 percent.³³ Established in 2012, the CST program recruits and trains all-women teams that are assigned to special forces and ranger teams for the specific purpose of gathering information and conducting searches. According to one cultural support team member, adding women to special operations teams ultimately “opened up 70 percent of the population in which we were operating.”³⁴ Servicewomen assigned to special operations teams were able to engage men, women and children in local communities in ways that were different from their male counterparts. Indeed, CSTs often became favored interlocutors for Afghan men in rural villages. Local men saw US servicewomen as a sort of “third gender” – women who operated outside of Afghan traditional gender norms and were less threatening than male members of the international security forces. The mere presence of CSTs on missions had a calming effect on operations, including direct action raids. When women were found to be among the force, the culturally gendered assumption was that they were not there to fight.³⁵

Increasing the number of women in the military can also be done through conscription and quotas. Many countries use conscription, but few countries conscript men and women equally. Israel – an early leader in conscripting women – does not apply the same conscription rules to men and women. Women have a shorter period of service and receive more exemptions than men. Despite the different rules for men and women, conscription in Israel has resulted in high levels of women’s participation in the military. Only two countries – Norway in 2016 and Sweden in 2018 – have moved to gender-equal conscription. However, both Norway and Sweden begin by filling their ranks with volunteers, who are predominately men, and then use conscripts to round out their ranks. As a result, in both countries women remain a minority population. South Africa provides an example of how focused recruitment and quotas can raise women’s participation levels in military organizations. When apartheid ended, the new South African government pledged to have public institutions reflect the demographic makeup of the general population. Although women have not achieved parity in South African military forces, they do represent one of the higher levels of women’s participation in a national military at 24 percent of the force.³⁶

In the absence of conscription, pay incentives that encourage countries to increase women’s participation can have positive effects. Many UN troop-contributing countries provide peacekeepers because they are a source of national revenue and military training. Troop-contributing countries are paid $1,428 per month per UN peacekeeper, but in most cases, troops receive much lower salaries in accordance with their national standards.³⁷ The difference becomes revenue for the military. If the United Nations were to raise the pay for women peacekeepers, it is likely that troop-contributing countries would make greater efforts to recruit women into their armed forces.
Some countries use gender-neutral incentives that effectively increase the rates of women’s participation in military organizations. In the United States men and women receive educational incentives to join the military. Women make up 57 percent of undergraduate college students in the country, and military education incentives help to increase the number of servicewomen. As of 2017, women made up 28 percent of military scholarship recipients at US civilian universities; approximately 25 percent of US military academy student populations were women. Women who enlist receive 36 months of educational benefits when they complete a four-year term of service. As a result, despite having an all-volunteer military, women’s participation is expected to grow from 17 percent to 20 percent of the force by 2020.

It is not enough to attract women to military service if they do not stay for long. Most militaries have had trouble retaining women in their ranks. Policies must be established that make continued military service attractive and possible for women. Maternity and family leave policies must be offered so that women, like men, can have families. Cultures that allow women to be marginalized, harassed and abused must be eliminated. Training and equipping practices, designed for men, must be developed to reduce injuries and optimize women’s performance. If military organizations remain male-centered, with few accommodations made for women, then women will remain a fractional minority in these organizations.

Obstacles to progress

There are many obstacles to women’s participation in military organizations, the most significant of which are laws and policies that formally limit or forbid women’s access to military occupations and units. However, even after laws and policies are changed, there has been and will be resistance that may take decades to overcome.

There are many cultural and structural challenges within military organizations that keep women’s participation rates low. Even in countries that have fully opened their military organizations, such as Australia, Canada, Sweden and the United States, women face marginalization, sexual harassment and assault and lower promotion rates. In the 2010s, the pervasive problem of sexual harassment and assault in even the most inclusive military organizations has received widespread attention. In 2017, Sweden – long considered to be one of the most gender-equal countries in the world – had a high-profile scandal when women in the Swedish military reported widespread sexual harassment. This problem is also widespread in other countries, including the United States.

In addition to problems of harassment and assault, women often leave the military for family reasons. Most militaries lack adequate family policies that support women who want both military careers and families. A few militaries, including Canada and Sweden, offer women and men extended maternity and paternity leave options. In the Canadian Armed Forces, women receive 26 weeks of paid maternity leave (which can be shared by both parents). In Sweden, paid maternity/paternity leave is extended to 18 months.
Women are also less likely to keep pace in terms of promotions, and as a result there are very few women at the most senior levels in any military organization. Even in Israel, where women are conscripted and serve in large numbers, promotions for women lag behind men, and few women become senior military leaders. Although women in the IDF are only excluded from eight percent of available positions, these exclusions are major obstacles for career advancement; the positions women are excluded from are the ones that lead to the military’s senior ranks. Fifty-one percent of IDF officers are women, but they tend to be junior officers. This suggests that while including women in drafts and opening up combat positions helps increase the percentage of women in military organizations, these steps are not enough to ensure equal treatment. Changes in promotion policies and elimination of structural barriers are key.

Even when women do rise to high ranks, they rarely receive prestigious operational assignments. In 2014, Major General Kristin Lund of Norway was celebrated for being the first woman to command a UN peacekeeping force. In 2017, Major Nina Raduha of Slovenia was celebrated as the first woman to command a UN military contingent.

**Changing military organizations**

According to organizational change theorists, resistance to change occurs at multiple levels – at the individual, group and organizational level. Efforts to increase women’s participation in military organizations activates resistance at all these levels.

Individual resistance comes in three forms: blind resistance, political resistance and ideological resistance. Blind resistance comes from individuals who are uncomfortable with any type of change. Change requires learning new things, operating in new environments and potentially failing at new challenges: it can be destabilizing. Political resistance is about power, and it comes from those who believe they stand to lose something in the change process. They fear their position, authority and ultimately their identity might be diminished in some way. Ideological resistance is based on specific beliefs – that the change is wrong for the organization because it is ill-fated or not in line with the organization’s principles.

In military organizations, blind resistance is often reflected in the “band of brothers” argument and cloaked as an issue of cohesion. Captain Lauren Serrano, a Marine Corps officer, argued in 2014 that men should be able to maintain a space where they can “tell raunchy jokes, walk around naked, swap sex stories, wrestle, and simply be young men together.” According to this line of reasoning, if women were introduced into units, men would have to change their behavior due to existing social norms that frown upon certain kinds of behavior in mixed-gender groups. Some men do not want to change their behavior and be forced to operate according to another paradigm. Changing behavior creates uncertainty and anxiety for many people; this can generate blind resistance to change.

Individual resistance to changing roles is also motivated by fear of losing the prestige that is automatically accrued by men who serve in the role of protector.
This type of resistance is even harder to reveal since most men will not explicitly say they do not want women to diminish their status by joining their ranks. According to one military observer, men from the combat specialties feel superior as long as women are kept in what are considered inferior positions in the military. This allows men to maintain a position of “unearned recognition.” Carol Cohn examined men’s objections to women’s inclusion by interviewing more than 80 US military officers. She found that objections often fell in “the PT protest” category. The PT (physical training) protest is an objection to the creation of different physical fitness standards allowed for women—a complaint that is not leveled against older men whose fitness requirements are lowered as they age. Cohn found that the standards argument is a more acceptable way to say that women do not belong because it is grounded in a “fairness” argument. Cohn argued that the PT protest is “a means of constructing and reinforcing gender difference, a way of asserting male superiority, a form of expressing anger about competition from women, and rage and grief about the loss of the military as a male sanctum.”

Ideological resistance is perhaps the easiest form of resistance to identify because the arguments against women are based on military effectiveness. According to this line of reasoning, women do not belong because their presence will harm fighting units. The claim is that combat units’ capabilities rest on vital unit cohesion that can only exist in all-male units. Retired Major General Robert Scales argued that “the precious and indefinable band of brothers effect so essential to winning in close combat would be irreparably compromised within mixed-gender infantry squads.” This line of argument was also used to keep black soldiers in segregated units and homosexual men closeted, but it is no longer accepted today, nor was it ever validated after integration occurred in the past.

Group resistance draws on many of the objections raised by individuals. Group resistance includes turf protection, closing ranks, changing allegiances and making demands for new leadership. “Turf protection” is a group behavior that protects existing functions and practices. “Closing ranks” is behavior that pulls group members into a close-knit team that refuses to adapt to changing requirements. “Changing allegiances” means engaging in tactics to align with another, less threatening, group. “Demanding new leadership” is a form of revolt by members who refuse to accept change or disagree with change for ideological reasons.

Turf protection is common in the combat branches. As soon as it appeared likely that women might be allowed to join the ground combat branches in the US military, barriers were erected to keep women out. The most prominent examples occurred in the US Marine Corps. The Marines changed entrance standards to their infantry officer course in order to make it nearly impossible for women to gain entry. Specifically, they changed the Day-1 Combat Endurance Test from a test that male officers who did not pass on Day-1 could retake until they passed to a test that women had to pass on the first day with no option to retake. Of the 29 women who attempted the course in 2014, only four passed the screening test. Later in the course, the four were all eliminated for other reasons. Some women
have called attention to these structural and discriminatory barriers and have forced the Marine Corps to adjust their practices.

Closing ranks was evident shortly after the US Secretary of Defense lifted the exclusionary policy in 2013. Then Commandant of the Marine Corps said that the Marines would not let enlisted women even attempt to join the infantry until there were “enough” women infantry officers in the ranks to make it “worth” it. But as noted previously, a structural barrier had been erected to keep women officers from completing the infantry officer course. Interestingly, in an effort to protect the infantry while conceding some ground, the Commandant acknowledged that it might be possible to include women in most of the other combat branches. This is an example of diversionary tactics or changing allegiances. The Commandant was willing to sacrifice some of the combat specialties in order to preserve the sanctity of the most honored and most masculine branch of the Corps – the infantry.

Many Marines objected to the Commandant’s position on women in combat units, calling it too soft and accusing him of making politically motivated concessions. In the comments sections of many blogs, some called for his resignation. One article questioned his ability to lead the Marine Corps at all because, as an aviator, he did not come from one of the ground-combat branches. This is an example of group resistance that demands new leadership in an effort to avoid organizational change.

Although, the terms institution and organization are often used interchangeably, they are different. Institutions are enduring entities that become a “way of organizing relationships that is widely familiar and routinely practiced” and are “defined by the unwritten rules that everyone understands about some kind of organized behavior.” Marriage is considered an institution because it is a widely followed, organized human behavior. Similarly, higher education is a widely followed institution of learning, and the military is an institution of national defense. All of these institutions are comprised of many organizations that are deeply gendered, with clear roles assigned to men and women. Over time, values, beliefs and practices become so ingrained that there is little questioning of the normative beliefs and behaviors upon which institutions, and the organizations that comprise them, rest. Institutions are long-lasting, resilient and stable. While they are subject to change processes, change is typically incremental and often discontinuous.

Organizations provide stable, routinized structures in which humans operate cooperatively. They are comprised of varying levels and degrees of human social systems that, ideally, work harmoniously toward common goals. As organizations are established, these social systems are structured according to the functional needs and requirements of the organization. According to systems theorists, systems are self-organized (we create them), hierarchical and very resilient. Over time, organizations develop a degree of equilibrium that makes them particularly stable and resistant to change. Not only does the hierarchical nature of the structure – perhaps epitomized in the military – contribute to stability, but multiple social-psychological factors also work to stabilize organizations. At the organizational level, resistance is systemic. That is, the system inherently resists being altered.
Most militaries are long-standing institutions composed of multiple subordinate organizations. These subordinate organizations may include an army, an air force, a navy, a maritime corps or a coast guard. They are well-established entities whose long-lasting, hierarchical structures are perhaps prototypically stable, making them highly resistant to change. Although the US military claims it has been ahead of other national organizations in terms of social inclusion, the reality is that the US military has been forced to make changes. Most of the important changes instituted in the US military in the 20th and 21st centuries have come about because of operational imperatives or civilian orders, not because the military embraced progressive policies or organizational change.

As military organizations move forward with the inclusion of women, organizational change theory explains not just likely sources of resistance but how to overcome resistance in implementing positive and effective change. Many theorists and practitioners have found that the more control and input individuals have in the change process, the more likely they are to adapt to the changing environment. While many have advocated for participative change processes that give individuals a greater sense of control, others have determined that specific conditions determine whether or not participative change is better than directive change. Directive change may be necessary in situations where external forces, such as new laws or policies, require an organization to adopt new behaviors, resulting in individuals having less control over the impending change.

**Strategies for progress**

Increasing women’s participation in military organizations is inherently about organizational and cultural change since military units are masculine constructs that have been developed and optimized for men. As countries have approached this issue, they have rarely done so in a holistic manner that recognizes the need for large-scale systemic change. Instead, women have been expected to assimilate into the existing male model while the model remains largely unchanged. Introducing or increasing women’s participation beyond token representation requires systemic change.

The “Eight-Stage Change Process” is an organizational change model that is part of the curriculum at the US Army’s two professional military schools – the Command and General Staff College and the Army War College. This model lays out a step-by-step process for bringing about large-scale, systemic change. It identifies priorities and specific steps for leaders who are embarking on systemic change. I use it here to assess how the US military implemented the decision to allow women in ground combat positions. More generally, this model provides a set of strategies and guidelines for advocates of change relative to the inclusion of women in national militaries.

**Establishing a sense of urgency**

In order to mobilize human capital and resources, organizational leadership must overcome not just active resistance but a multitude of sources that contribute to
complacency and impede change efforts. Creating urgency and momentum for change requires bold and even risky action. When the senior leadership of the US military announced its plan to allow women to serve in all previously closed specialties, it did so in a way that created a sense of urgency. First, the change was directive in nature. It stated that the 1994 Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule “is rescinded effective immediately.” Second, although the new policy opened positions and units “immediately,” the leadership gave the military services three years to implement the change, allowing them some time to adjust. Finally, it established planning and implementation milestones to ensure the services met the targeted goal of full integration within three years.

Creating a guiding coalition

Effective change must be steered by a guiding coalition that includes people who have power, expertise, credibility, good leadership skills and commitment to the change. When the US Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff announced their decision to rescind the previous policy, they placed responsibility for implementing this change on the military service chiefs, and they designated the personnel and readiness office within the staff of the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) to oversee implementation. Unfortunately, their actions violated some of the key principles for creating a good guiding coalition. First, the overseeing organization – OSD – was (and is) an administrative staff that has no authority to direct the actions of the military departments. Second, the OSD staff lacked credibility for understanding the nature of the integration challenges faced by the different services. Finally, OSD staff had little expertise in overseeing an integration effort of this magnitude, and it was not within the office’s core mission or competencies.

Despite the fact that the OSD staff was not well-suited to leading a guiding coalition, each of the military departments assumed responsibility for implementation within its own organizations. Each of the departments took different approaches toward establishing an internal guiding coalition. Some created robust guiding coalitions, while others engaged in ad hoc efforts. For example, the US Army designated a specific command to take the lead on the integration effort, while the US Marine Corps doled out responsibility to numerous subordinate agencies and staffs. After a year, the Marine Corps had made little progress and was forced to develop a new plan that included a well-defined guiding coalition. Unfortunately and most damaging was that some senior military leaders continued to express reservations over the wisdom of the directed change.

Developing a vision and a strategy

Vision guides people where the organization needs to go and explains why it needs to go there. Strategy defines a way to get there. The best organizational visions and strategies include some degree of member participation. In this case, the US
military had a mixed approach that failed to incorporate best practices. When the Secretary of Defense made the announcement to rescind the old policy, he told the services where they needed to go but he failed to explain why it was in the best interest of the organizations to get there. However, he did give the services a limited chance to influence the final outcome. He told them that if they determined that areas of their organizations could not be fully integrated, then they could request an exception to the new policy. Any exception would have to be “narrowly tailored” and based on a “rigorous analysis of the factual data regarding the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for the position.” Therefore, while this change was directive in nature, it allowed for some degree of participatory decisionmaking relative to the final outcome. Interestingly, the services took different approaches to this guidance depending upon how they interpreted the language of the guidance. As for strategy, the Secretary of Defense largely left that up to the services. He provided some guiding principles as well as benchmarked dates, but how they reached the end state was up to the organizations themselves.

Communicating the change vision

To bring about major organizational change, one scholar observes that a “shared sense of a desirable future can help motivate and coordinate the kinds of actions that create transformations.” In the US case, insufficient communication and mixed messages led to confusion about the desired future state. When the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff announced the policy change (and in subsequent statements), they used qualifying language such as “we must open up service possibilities for women as fully as possible.” This created ambiguity about the end state.

The individual services interpreted this vague vision in various ways. The Marine Corps’ professional journal, *The Gazette*, engaged in a public debate about the merits of opening up all combat occupations to women. It published numerous articles challenging the efficacy of allowing women into its core combat specialty, the infantry. Most of the critiques argued that, for a myriad of reasons, it was not “possible” to open the infantry to women. At the same time that the Marine Corps was debating whether women should be allowed into combat specialties, the Army made a deliberate effort to figure out how women would be integrated. These different approaches reflect widely differing interpretations of what should have been a clearly communicated vision and strategy for bringing about organizational change.

Empowering employees for broad-based action

Structural impediments, recalcitrant leaders, and a lack of training are all potential barriers to organizational change. Removing these barriers gives organizational staff both the power and resources to affect change. In the US military, many of these barriers have hindered the change process. One of the structural barriers lies
in the joint nature of the US military services. All of the services support each other in various ways and to varying degrees, and all of the services provide personnel to Special Operations Command. As the services moved forward on this directive, they found themselves blocked by slower-moving services. For example, the Army trains Armor Officers for both the Army and the Marine Corps. The Marines said that they could not move forward on gender integration until the Army opened its armor school to women. Similarly, all of the services said that, until Special Operations Command began accepting women, they could not open their elite specialty training programs to women because women’s assignment and promotion opportunities would be limited.

Another barrier was senior military leaders who made public statements that impeded full integration. For example, Marine Corps Commandant General James Amos said that if there were not enough women officers who were interested or who qualified for the Marine Corps infantry, then it would not worth the effort to allow any of them to serve in the infantry.68 The Commandant never defined what would be “enough” women officers; he only indicated a lack of senior leadership support for this change. The Commandant later changed his tone and his level of support for this initiative.69

Throughout 2014, the Marine Corps made a concerted effort to overcome organizational resistance and barriers by holding a series of town hall meetings at units and installations around the world to address the integration concerns of Marines. These events were open to all Marines and to the public. These meetings were designed to reassure Marines that standards would remain unchanged and units would not be weakened by the introduction of women. The meetings were conducted by senior Marine men who were themselves infantry officers.70 The speakers emphasized that standards would be maintained and that only women who met existing high standards would be admitted to combat jobs. But these leaders never explained how units and capabilities might be improved by the presence of women.

**Generating short-term wins**

As an organization begins to change, it is important that members see and understand how the change is benefiting the organization. If short-term successes are not highlighted, then skeptics will begin to challenge the value of the change.71 As the US military moved forward with this integration initiative, it highlighted and celebrated some early successes. Both the Army and the Marine Corps allowed women from historically open specialties – such as communications, logistics and intelligence – to serve in previously closed combat units. Both services noted that women were well received in the newly opened units. Also, when the first enlisted women graduated from infantry training during a trial period, the Marine Corps celebrated its success by allowing the media to cover the training.

However, others have noted that some of the early statements designed to celebrate this change were less successful. One observer pointed out that the US
military made a number of statements to sell this change as one that would not “harm” the identity of the combat arms community rather than celebrate it as a step forward. Robert Egnell noted, “The issue of women in combat should not be approached through the lens of damage control, but rather with an emphasis on maximizing the effectiveness of military organizations in the contemporary strategic context.” The vision and the reasons for change should have been articulated more powerfully at the outset of the process.

**Consolidating gains and producing more change**

As one scholar observed, resistance to change is “always waiting to reassert itself.” Hardcore resisters continue to look for opportunities to undermine the change process, and short-term gains are not enough to transform the entire system. The interdependent nature of complex social systems means that change must be widespread throughout the system before long-term change and transformation is realized. When the US military was in the early stages of this change process, it identified mid-term and long-term challenges to fully realizing this change. For example, in order to accommodate women in the Navy, Navy officials believed that submarines would have to be modified to provide separate berthing for men and women. Some of the Navy’s older ships could not be retrofitted without incurring prohibitive expenses. The Navy decided to allow some of these older ships to be decommissioned rather than modified to accommodate women. The continued existence of some male-only ships allows pockets of resistance to persevere.

**Anchoring new approaches in culture**

Culture is arguably “the most difficult element to change in an organization” and should not be the focus of the change. According to Kotter, “culture changes only after you have successfully altered people’s actions, after the new behavior produces some group benefit for a period of time.” Kotter’s rule of thumb is that any organization that sets out to change culture as a first step is doomed to failure. Regardless of how cultural change is tackled, it is clear that culture develops slowly and is hard to see and understand, even for those who are imbedded in the culture. Some aspects of culture are visible, while others are hidden deep within the subconscious of the organization. Most definitions of organizational culture refer to an organization’s shared values, norms, rituals, stories and expectations. Culture is sometimes referred to as the software that invisibly guides all aspects of an organization’s functioning.

National military organizations stand out as being especially steeped in tradition with enduring cultures. These cultures rest on centuries of “the universal gendering of war,” where women have served in support roles and rarely as combatants. For full integration and increased participation to take root, organizational change will require sustained efforts on the part of leaders and change activists to highlight
improved capabilities and to cement new beliefs and normative behaviors in the organizations. Changes of this magnitude take decades.

**Best practices or common approaches?**

In 2019, NATO hosted a two-day workshop intended to “identify and share research and best practices” for integrating women into NATO member and partner nation militaries. Much is made of identifying and implementing “best practices” for women’s increased inclusion, as if there is a magical set of discrete actions that should be taken. However, although women have been slowly integrating into military organizations for decades, there is little research on the most effective strategies for successful integration or for increasing participation and retention. Monitoring and evaluation often ends abruptly after the first few years of integration, and there is limited information on how women may or may not have affected operational capabilities.

While many countries appear to follow similar strategies and practices for integrating and increasing women’s participation, little attention has been paid to whether these strategies and practices are or should be considered best practices. For example, the US military recently implemented a “Leaders First” policy that requires the presence of at least two women leaders (officers or non-commissioned officers) in a combat unit before junior enlisted women can be assigned. It was meant to ease the introduction of enlisted women. This was touted as a best practice, but subsequent research found that it may be harming efforts to integrate women. It might not be a “best practice” that other countries should follow.

An approach adopted by many countries is to tout the increased capabilities of diverse teams. Linking women’s participation to increased capabilities is a strategic communications strategy being used to overcome organizational resistance, but it might not be having the intended effects. A growing body of research shows that training based on this line of reasoning may be counterproductive and may actually reduce acceptance of diverse teams.

The best way to overcome resistance to women’s inclusion might be the creation of gender-neutral job standards that are applied to men and women equally. Many arguments against women center on their physical differences; the assumption is that women cannot perform the most physically demanding jobs. When the US Army opened ground-combat jobs to women, many members of the military were certain that women would never qualify for elite units such as the Army’s 75th Ranger Regiment. However, in 2015 three women soldiers successfully completed the grueling Ranger course, and they qualified using the same standards as men. The school’s commanding officer publicly stated that the women had been held to the exact same standards as the men. Women have continued to graduate from this course, (although in much smaller numbers than the men), and they have been selected to serve in the 75th Ranger Regiment.

There is an almost myopic focus in many NATO countries on establishing “gender-free” or “gender-neutral” occupational standards as a way of garnering
acceptance of women in traditionally masculine jobs, but there are no established best practices for setting these standards. The result is that there are no two countries with the same standards for what are inherently identical jobs such as “tanker” or “infanteer.” Common approaches to women’s inclusion have included:

- Reviewing occupational standards to ensure that they are job-based, gender-neutral and applied to men and women equally.
- Pledging not to set quotas for women, to avoid creating the appearance that standards are being lowered.
- Engaging in messaging that touts the benefits of increased capabilities brought about by a larger recruiting pool and more diverse teams.
- Examining organizational policies to identify those that are gendered and have a disproportionately negative impact on women, including recruitment, promotion and retention policies.
- Identifying equipping and training needs that optimize women’s performance, reduce injuries and increase participation.

Conclusion

Despite the assertion by John Keegan that “women do not fight,” it is clear that the historical record is less about women’s capabilities and desires and more about what women have been allowed to do in military organizations. Not only have women shown interest and aptitude, but as cultural norms have changed women are increasingly joining military organizations. The quickest way to increasing women’s participation is through conscription, targeted recruitment and incentive programs that treat men and women as citizens with the same responsibilities for national defense.

Ultimately, though, military organizations will have to make military service attractive to all genders, including women. Organizational cultures that allow discrimination and harassment must be eliminated. Training and equipment have to be adapted to allow for a more diverse force. If military organizations remain male-centered, with few accommodations made for women, then women will remain a fractional minority.

The record to date reveals a series of mixed approaches to this organizational and cultural change process. Mixed messages from senior leaders and outright challenges to a modified military identity, evident in professional journals, do not bode well for a smooth transformation to reconstructed individual, group and organizational identities. However, military organizations in many countries will have to adapt to the new strategic and technological challenges of the 21st century. Today and in the future, militaries need personnel with a much broader range of skills than those typically associated with armies of the past. The final push to integrate women in the military is coinciding with a reconstructed, high-tech, post-modern soldier identity that embraces the contributions and inclusion of new capabilities.
Women’s greater inclusion in military organizations is and will be a function of changing cultural norms that can be advanced through a series of mutually supporting efforts. UN Security Council resolutions, demands for women on the ground and legal challenges will all serve to push change, but it is possible that women may never serve in military organizations at the same rate as men. Even as adaptation occurs, organizational cultures evolve and reconstructed identities emerge. How long this process takes will depend on the change methods that each country employs. Women’s acceptance into support-based occupations has been slow but steady in many militaries. As national militaries open combat positions to women, the path to changing cultures and adapting individual, group and organizational identities within combat sub-communities is likely to be even slower – but it is not impossible. A hundred years ago, it would have been unthinkable to envision a woman sailor on a Navy ship, but today, women command Navy combat ships.

Notes

4 Megan Alpert, “To Be a Guerrilla, and a Woman, in Colombia,” *The Atlantic* (September 28, 2016).
9 Ibid.
15 Ibid.


Ibid., p. 7.

Ibid.

Manning, *Women in the Military*, p. 3.


Attaching soldiers for short duration to make use of specialized skills is common practice in the US military. However, in situations where the need is enduring, like the requirement for a medic to support an infantry company during extended periods, women were being temporarily attached while a male medic would be permanently assigned.


Ibid., p. viii.


See Remarks of the UN Secretary-General in the Security Council Open Debate on Women in Peacekeeping, Meetings Coverage SC/13773 (April 11, 2019).


Ibid., p. 3.

Ibid.


Statista, *Number of Bachelor’s Degrees by Gender Since 1950* (New York: Statista, @ statista.com).


DN Debatt, “1,768 Kvinnor i Försvaret: Alla Anmälningar Måste Tas På Alvar (1,768 Women in the Defense: All Notifications Must Be Taken Seriously),” *DN Debatt* (December 2, 2017).


Burke, *Organization Change*, pp. 120–121.


See Amos, *Integrating Female Marines*.


Goldstein, *War and Gender*, p. 10.


