Reengineering Gender Relations in Modern Militaries: An Evolutionary Perspective

Rebecca J. Hannagan, PhD¹, Holly Arrow, PhD² & John Orbell, PhD³

¹Department of Political Science, Northern Illinois University
²Department of Psychology, University of Oregon
³Institute of Cognitive and Decision Sciences, University of Oregon

MANUSCRIPT UNDER REVIEW - PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION

Word Count: 7379

Correspondence should be addressed to: Rebecca J. Hannagan, Department of Political Science, 406 Zulauf Hall, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115.

Phone: 815-753-9675    FAX: 815-753-6302    Email: rhannaga@niu.edu
Mailing addresses of co-authors:

Holly Arrow, Department of Psychology, 1227 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, 97403-1227

John Orbell, Institute for Cognitive and Decision Sciences, 1227 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-1227
Abstract

This paper presents a framework for understanding how the sexual assault of women in the military has been influenced by the particular ways in which military structures have accommodated the evolutionary logic of gender relations. The paradigm is used to infer which combinations of institutional structures, group norms, and individual behaviors are likely to be associated with higher or lower frequencies of sexual assault—and why. The proposed framework is intended to guide future data collection in theoretically coherent ways. We also suggest how individual soldiers, military units, and the command structure can help manage gender relations in a way that promotes military effectiveness in integrated units while countering the threat of military sexual trauma.

Key words: Evolutionary theory; gender dynamics; military sexual trauma; rape; warfare.
Reengineering Gender Relations in Modern Militaries: An Evolutionary Perspective

Much recent literature on women in the military addresses either the roles that women should or should not play in the military or the practical challenges that military women face. Literature on the first topic discusses the capabilities of women to be effective warriors and the probable or actual impact of gender integration on the morale, cohesion, and effectiveness of formerly all-male military units (e.g., Goldstein, 2001). Literature on the second topic (e.g., Friedman, 2006; Sadler, Booth, Cook, & Doebbeling, 2003; Yaeger, Himmelfarb, Cammack, & Mintz, 2006) has focused quite a bit on what is now known by the term military sexual trauma (MST): “sexual harassment and sexual assault that occurs in military settings” (Street & Stafford, 2009).

Literature on these topics draws on theories about group cohesion, male bonding, and group composition, as well as on theoretical accounts of the functions and impact of sexual harassment and rape. As yet, however, the field lacks an overall framework that integrates these two strands of work within a single theoretical frame. Currently available data is also largely split between information on women as victims or on men as perpetrators, without integrating the two. Drawing on evolutionary theory, we develop an account of gendered behavior in military contexts that integrates sexual assault with the dynamics underlying military effectiveness. This framework allows us to make predictions about empirical regularities that have not yet been documented.

We begin by specifying some oft-noted attributes of military organization that promote military effectiveness in warfare. Next we develop the evolutionary underpinnings of tensions in male-male, female-female, and male-female dynamics. We
propose that the strongly gendered nature of war throughout history has promoted norms and practices that channel male-male status competition in ways that support cohesion and hierarchy among men while defining women as a collective resource, a threat to group cohesion, and a denigrated outgroup. In the absence of cultural accommodations that alter these historical patterns of managing gender dynamics, military women operate in an environment in which sexual assault may be deployed to enact and defend traditional military structures. Fortunately, constructive cultural accommodations are both possible and already in practice in many niches in the U.S. military.

**Group Dynamics Critical to Military Effectiveness**

Military sexual trauma (MST) occurs in both peacetime and war. For warriors, the military is a way of life (Keegan, 1993), and the purpose of the military is to train and deploy warriors to achieve military objectives defined by superiors. Military effectiveness requires that warriors defeat the enemy’s efforts to block their pursuit of these objectives. Two critical features that support effectiveness are (1) unit cohesion and (2) an effective command structure. Both have gender implications and have been implicated in MST. In this section, we focus on these dynamics for male warriors.

**Unit Cohesion**

The military is a powerful institution for organizing men in cooperative groups to compete violently with other groups. Although men may join the military for many reasons, in combat they stand and fight—often under threat of imminent death—in large part because they will not abandon the “brothers” with whom they serve (Marshall, 1947; Shils & Janowitz, 1948). The propensity for men to bond in fighting groups is a likely adaptation to the need for males in the same band to act in concert against common
enemies. Particularly when ancestral war had genocidal effects either on a whole group or on the male lines of descent within a group (Keeley, 1997; LeBlanc, 1999, p. 716), war would exert strong selection pressure. Under the pressure of war, poorly bonded groups of warriors are more likely to break apart, resulting in high casualty rates and loss of resources.

The use of initiation rites to bond cohorts of males is widespread. A study of 60 societies found that the prevalence of warfare was the best predictor of the severity of such initiation rites (Sosis, Kress, & Boster, 2007). In contemporary militaries, basic training breaks down the separateness of individual identity and exerts intense stress on groups of recruits to reinforce a strong collective identity. These bonds are strengthened in combat, developing into the tactical cohesion that holds units together and maintains morale and effectiveness under fire (Greenbaum, 1979; Marshall, 1947).

**Effective Command Structure**

Bonded groups of men may, of course, perceive the wisdom of evading others who are intent on killing them. Obedience to a command structure ensures that military units move in a coordinated fashion toward danger. Because of the military importance of following orders that are likely to get one killed or injured, military organizations put a high importance on respecting and supporting the command structure and punishing any actions that subvert its authority.

Threatening situations tend to strengthen both men’s and women’s desire to follow leaders, respect status and hierarchy, and aggregate with others facing the same threat. Reminders of one’s own mortality (which war provides in abundance) enhance the endorsement of cultural norms and obedience to authority for both sexes (Pyszczynski,
Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997). In other words, obedience is not a sex-specific feature of military organization.

**Gendered Behavior and the Military**

The connection of male initiation rites to warfare is one example of how gender is implicated in fundamental processes that societies have relied on in training warriors. Although female warriors have played a role across time in many societies, the strongly gendered nature of war appears to be a cultural universal. As Goldstein (2001) documents in his comprehensive study of gender and war, the strongest gender roles “are those most closely connected with war” (p. 7) and the link between war and gender “is more stable, across cultures and through time, than are either gender roles outside of war or the forms and frequency of war itself” (p. 9). We turn now to the underlying logic of gendered relations to make sense of this phenomenon.

**The Evolutionary Logic of Gendered Relations**

The evolutionary logic of gendered heterosexual relations has promoted male and female sexual strategies that are sometimes congruent and sometimes in conflict, both within and between the sexes. Although they evolved based on the differential situation of men and women with regards to mating, reproduction, and parenting, the implications of these sexual strategies can be activated in domains (such as war-fighting) that appear on the surface to have little to do with reproduction. After a brief explanation of why strategies differ between the sexes, we describe the implications for gendered relations among women, among men, and between men and women.

According to Trivers (1972, 1974), the key to sex differences in heterosexual mating strategies between men and women is *differential parental investment*. The
demands of pregnancy, lactation, and subsequent child-rearing mean that women reliably
invest more heavily in any offspring than do men, and the mother’s investment is more
critical for a child’s survival. The higher investment and smaller potential number of
offspring makes women more choosy about mating than men. For men, the minimal
investment to sire a child is trivial, and hence men can potentially sire dozens, even
hundreds of offspring. However, because women are choosy, low status men with
minimal resources may have trouble finding a woman to mate with, and thus are in
danger of having no children at all.

Differential parental investment and higher variability in fertility for men explains
why men and women differ in their propensity for interpersonal violence. For women,
avoiding physically violent and harmful situations is adaptive because it increases the
probability of keeping their offspring alive (Campbell, 2002; Geary, 1998; Hager, 1997;
Hrdy, 1999). For men, however, risk taking that might pay off in more mating
opportunities is more frequently worth the gamble (Campbell, 2002, p. 100). These
differences shape relations within and between the sexes as follows.

**Male-Male Relations**

Men compete with other men to gain access to choosy women, and they may also
cooperate with other men to limit female sexual autonomy and the power of female
choice (Daly & Wilson, 1983; Geary, 1998; Lippa, 2002; Van Vugt, De Cremer, &
Janssen, 2007). Male status competition can disrupt group living and divert energy from
more productive pursuits for the group. If it becomes violent it can kill or maim other
males. Indeed, male-on-male violence is the most prevalent cause of homicide (Buss,
2005; Daly & Wilson, 1988). Clear status hierarchies and group bonding can both reduce
the negative effects of male-male competition. Hierarchies reduce the propensity for lower ranked males to challenge higher ranked males, which tends to restrict most competition to contests within one’s status cohort. Group bonding can reduce the intensity and lethality of competition within cohorts by inducing men to view one another as brothers who have a mutual interest in survival.

Intergroup competition can also help dampen intragroup male competition by redirecting aggression outwards and highlighting the potential costs of internal discord for effective group action. Winning groups collectively enjoy the status rewards that accompany victory, which is especially appealing to men who might otherwise find themselves on the losing end of male status contests. The transfer of status competition to the intergroup level helps promote within-group cooperation among men (Van Vugt et al., 2007), creating a mutually reinforcing positive feedback loop that promotes military effectiveness (e.g., Shils & Janowitz 1948). If increased access to women is perceived as a probable consequence of winning, this provides a further incentive for men to cooperate to gain this collective reward.

Female-Female Relations

Within the Trivers (1972, 1974) framework, women compete to mate with the “best” men to ensure healthy children and to secure resources for their children. Women who have or are seeking committed male-female pair bonds may also band together and mobilize against sexually promiscuous women who might threaten the committed relationships that funnel male resources to women and their children (Campbell, 2002; Geary, 1998; Hrdy, 1999). This drives the dynamic that unites wives against mistresses and prostitutes, promoting female alliances against women who employ a different sexual
strategy. Because of the greater impact of physical injury on the likely survival of their children, however, women are much more likely than men to choose indirect forms of aggression over violence (Campbell, 1999).

Women will cooperate to share childrearing tasks and protect collective resources their children need, and may also ally with other women to reduce male sexual coercion (Gowaty, 2003; Low, 2000, 2005; Hrdy, 1999; Smuts, 1992, 1995; Zihlman, 1981). Females are more likely than males to prefer interacting in dyads or smaller groups within which they are able to forge relationships based on equity (Geary, 1998), instead of in larger groups. Intergroup competition has less impact on women’s propensity to cooperate in small groups than it does on men’s (Van Vugt et al., 2007), and in general differences in behavior evoked by intergroup as opposed to interpersonal contexts are weaker among women.

**Female-Male Relations**

According to the Trivers (1972, 1974) logic, at the root of gendered dynamics is a fundamental conflict: men tend to favor strategies that improve their access to and control of female sexuality while women seek to maintain control of their own sexuality and reproduction (Campbell, 2002; Geary, 1998; Hrdy, 1999; Smuts, 1992, 1995). Men and women also form pair bonds and cooperate in childrearing (Hrdy, 2009). Along with one-on-one interactions among individual men and women who may or may not view each other as plausible mates, both men and women use alliances to attain and maintain dominance and counter within-group threats from other men and women. In a situation of intergroup threat all members of a threatened group – male and female – benefit from coordinating to neutralize the threat and protect the group.
Because access to women underlies status competition among males, male-female pairings can disrupt alliances among males. The specifics of any given trade-off between bonding with a female and alliances with other males will depend, in part, on the immediate importance of the male alliance (Smuts, 1992). When male alliances are critical to a group’s survival, allied males may view intimate pair bonds with females as a source of tension that threatens group cohesion. (Low, 2000; Smuts, 1995). Collective strategies such as derogation of women can be used to counter the perceived threat.

Male alliances help maintain male dominance in society and neutralize the impact of female alliances, reducing female autonomy and choice (Low, 2000, 2005). In the male quest to damp down competition for choosy women, prostitutes and sexually promiscuous women are allies, while wives and girlfriends are a threat. The most extreme collective strategy for eliminating female choice is gang rape. Alliances among females can help restrict generalized male access and protect female sexual autonomy from the threat of rape. However, such alliances are more difficult to forge between women who are pursuing the conflicting sexual strategies of promiscuity versus exclusive pair bonds.

**Gender in Traditional Military Organization**

Although women have long been involved in war (De Pauw, 1998; Enloe, 2000; Goldstein, 2001), participation as warriors in formally organized units has been the exception rather than the rule. Instead, traditional military organization has been premised on women serving as the “home and hearth” to be protected, the “object of desire” to be won, and suppliers of support services (including sex) to the troops.
Traditional female roles have included camp followers, laundresses, nurses, and clerical support staff. Women have also served in organized military brothels, which have been viewed by the military hierarchy as a resource for maintaining morale in a male-bonded organization (Moon, 1997; Stiglmayer, 1994).

When women have served as soldiers with men, their roles have often been largely invisible and quickly erased. The U.S. Navy proudly displayed the female yeomen and women marines in parades to celebrate the end of WW I, for example, but after the war the only women allowed to wear a navy uniform were the nurses (Ebbert & Hall, 2002, p. 96). The concept of women as fellow warriors doesn’t fit very well in traditionally organized fighting units, which tend to accommodate the tensions between gender dynamics and military priorities by treating women either as intruders or as the “spoils” of war. We propose that both views can contribute to the prevalence of military sexual trauma.

Members of the military command structure and organizational norms and policies can endorse such views implicitly and explicitly, or counter them with a professional model of male and female warriors as comrades-in-arms. Small groups can also promote and support norms that shape gender relations independent of approval or reinforcement by the command structure. Next, we describe what we view as the three military views of women most likely to affect the prevalence of sexual assault.

**Women as Intruders**

When military socialization is based on forging men into male bonded groups, women are commonly viewed as a threat to group cohesion. The ease with which this notion can be evoked can be seen in cross-cultural studies that have documented an
extremely common cultural pattern in which women's influences on men's hunting and war are seen as harmful, and are prevented via, for example, taboos against women using weapons associated with these male activities (Brightman, 1996). Such taboos effectively exclude women from participating in these domains. If this view of women as threatening intruders is evoked and reinforced it can fuel sexual harassment and assault of military women in an effort to keep them “outside” the bonds of the unit. Because women are seen as violating important norms, harassment is likely to be hostile in tone and assault may include gang rape as a collective punishment. Sexual assault is used as a weapon to counter the threat and drive women away.

**Women as “Spoils”: A Sexual Resource**

Throughout many societies and time periods, women have been treated as spoils of war that the warriors on the winning side may claim as a reward. This long history, and the intertwining of military culture with reproductive success for men that it instantiates, makes it easy to evoke among male warriors the notion that women are a prize to be won and shared among men. Military recruiting practices that promise young men exciting sexual experiences if they join the military evoke this idea, which is further supported if military policies ensure that troops have ready access to prostitutes. If men view access to women as an entitlement of military service, they may take their “spoils” by force if willing women are not available. This puts military women as well as non-military women in proximity to male troops at risk. Sexual assault that is promoted by this view of women differs from the “women as intruders” dynamic in that it is more about sexual access, with the use of force being a means to this end. Officers who use
command structure tools of coercion over subordinate women to force them into unwanted sexual contact are also enacting and validating this view of women.

**Women as Comrades-in-Arms**

Treating women who fight among men or provide support roles such as nurse or medic as comrades-in-arms should discourage rather than promote sexual assault. The dynamic evoked is not so much the cohesion of a small band of hunters but the larger solidarity of a village under a common threat. Men and women view one another as “family” or as “brothers and sisters” united in a common defense of their home territory. This view of women should be associated with a low incidence of sexual harassment or assault of military women, with rates comparable to or lower than civilian peacetime rates. The goal of victory is gender neutral, and the metaphor of kinship helps discourage sexual contact by evoking incest taboos.

**The Diversity of Women’s Military Experiences: A Preliminary Typology**

Systematic data connecting the three models identified above to the prevalence of sexual trauma and the nature of assault (e.g., gang rape, date rape, or sexual coercion by a commanding officer) is not available, although others have noted the importance of distinguishing among different kinds of rape (e.g., Sadler et al., 2005) because of the different severity of trauma. In the absence of systematic data, we have drawn instead on the naturalistic data of narratives and cases to develop a preliminary typology of women’s military experiences with men. This includes both the experiences of female soldiers and the experiences of civilian women who belong to or interact with military men. We believe the prevalence of these different types of experiences should covary
with the relative endorsement of the three views of women by the individual men involved and by the military units to which they belong.

Our goal here is not to test this hypothesis, but simply to organize women’s experiences into categories that will allow a systematic test of associations when appropriate data is collected. Our typology distinguishes among individual, dyadic, and collective levels of analysis, and, when experiences include sexual contacts and/or ongoing relationships, whether these are chosen by women, coerced, or imposed upon them by physical force.

**Individual Attack**

A common account by women in the military is of an individual male colleague who makes forceful, unwanted, and unwelcome sexual advances. The event itself is similar to one-on-one sexual assault in non-military organizational settings, but the decision whether or not to file a complaint has different implications. Sergeant Kayla Williams, who served in Iraq in a military intelligence company, provides an example.

*So I stand there awkwardly. Rivers and I make small talk.*

*Things happen fast after that.*

*It’s dark, but not so dark that I can’t decipher at some point that River’s pants are open. That he’s got one hand on his penis. And then suddenly, he’s also got one hand on my arm. He’s pulling me pretty firmly toward him, maneuvering my hand toward his crotch.*

*“What the fuck—”*

*I pull back hard, but Rivers is strong. He’s still grabbing my arm, preventing me from leaving.*
“No,” I say. “No, no, no, no. Let me go. Let me the fuck go.”

(Williams, 2005, p. 207)

Eventually, Rivers does let her go without further sexual contact. In debating whether or not to report the incident, Williams questioned whether the other men in her unit would support her. In the end, she spoke informally with a superior without filing a complaint, and Rivers was reassigned. However, by damaging her trust in her fellow soldiers, the event weakened unit cohesion.

**Dyadic Consensual**

This category includes all voluntary romantic and/or sexual relationships with a male member of the military. This category includes military women, military wives, and civilian women who form attachments with military men. Others in the partners’ unit or units are typically aware of the relationship.

Army specialist Rachelle Spors formed such a relationship with Navy corpsman Aswald Hooker, who was stationed at a camp Spors convoyed to regularly while serving as a medic in Iraq. When Spors’s ambulance was hit byIEDs, seriously wounding her, Hooker was one of the corpsmen who met the medevac helicopter. Buddies who knew of the relationship did all they could to support him. *Every so often, someone from the medical staff would leave the ER to update Hooker on Spors’ progress. “She’s awake.” “She’s responding.” “They’re intubating her.”* (Holmstedt, 2007, p. 72).

An example from World War II were the “mobile field wives” attached to Soviet officers at the front. As veteran Vera Ivanovna Malakhova recalled, “Sexual relations occurred at the front: legitimate, illegitimate, it existed . . . it degraded people and elevated people and saved their lives.” Women like Malakhova who remained
uninvolved resented the field wives as contributing to the image of frontline women as “whores.” “*We conducted ourselves honorably and disliked the PPZh* [the Russian acronym for mobile field wives]. *They had privileges*” (Engel, 1999, p.146).

When their territory is overrun by enemy soldiers, women may attach themselves to a soldier to gain protection or secure resources. A German women who paired up with an occupying Russian soldier explained “*I need a wolf who will keep the wolves away from me*” (Anonymous, 1945/2005; Grossmann, 1999, p. 171). Military women may also seek out such protective arrangements. A recent study of veterans found that 27% of women reported getting involved in a relationship with a man as a defensive strategy against sexual harassment and assault (Sadler et al., 2003, p. 266).

**Dyadic Rank Coercive**

Male officers may use the powers of rank to coerce female subordinates into unwelcome sexual relationships, a phenomenon that some call “command rape” (Corbett, 2007). Malakhova reported how rank constrained her response to unwanted advances by a commissar: “*I remember that I was shaking all over. If things had been different I would have slapped him in the face. But here I couldn’t, he was my superior*” (Engel, 1999, p. 144).

Army Specialist Suzanne Swift, who went AWOL rather than return for another tour of duty in Iraq, attributed her PTSD diagnosis to the combined stresses of combat and the command rape she experienced while on active duty. Swift was coerced into sexual relations with her squad leader that lasted four months. In a study by Sadler and colleagues (2003) 40% of women veterans who had been raped said they did not report
the assault because the perpetrator was a ranking officer in their chain of command (p. 267).

Although command rape is made possible by the dominance hierarchy of rank, it can also heighten tensions in the hierarchy between the rapist and subordinate men who view the woman as a comrade and see a superior abusing one of their peers. However, other soldiers may also interpret the woman’s behavior as that of a “slut” who is seeking advantage via a consensual dyadic relationship.

**Collective Consensual**

According to Williams and other military women reporting on their experiences, “slut” is a slur used liberally by U.S. military men, often with little connection to a woman’s actual sexual behavior. “You’re a bitch, a slut or a dyke — or you’re married, but even if you’re married, you’re still probably one of the three,” Sergeant Bradford said (Myers, 2009). However, some women do choose sexual promiscuity as a way to connect with multiple men in or outside their units. Williams (2005) reports: “Take this one girl. I heard from reliable sources in Iraq that she gave head to every guy in her unit…. I heard it from guys who were there. Participants….this particular girl got caught in the act… More than once. Reprimanded for dereliction of duty.” Williams and other military women who are more choosy about sex resented sexually promiscuous women, who made it tougher “for the rest of us females to get our work done without having guys insinuate that blow jobs was part of our Advanced Individual Training” (pp. 18-19). Female promiscuity fits with the “women as sexual resource” model. Along with sexual pleasure, military women may use sex to gain acceptance, attention, and,
according to Williams, lots of special favors that "could make your load while deployed a whole lot lighter" (p. 20).

**Collective Exchange**

Prostitutes, like promiscuous military women, provide a collective resource that fits the "spoils of war" model: they belong to all and none of the soldiers simultaneously. In contrast to the tensions male-female pair bonds can evoke among men and among women, prostitution poses no challenge to cohesion and the military hierarchy, and has often been facilitated by military commanders to promote morale among male troops.

Moon (1997) documents the experiences of Korean GI prostitutes, or *kijich’on*. Prior to the Korean War and American occupation, lower class, orphaned, or widowed women were camp followers who offered to do laundry, run errands, and provide sex for money or food. Prostitution was later officially organized by the Korean and U.S. governments - via the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty - into an R&R system for American service men (p. 27). An interview with a U.S. Army chaplain revealed what soldiers had read and heard before arriving in Korea: "*Stories about Korean or Thai women being beautiful, subservient . . . property, things, slaves . . . it's all there*” (p. 34).

The U.S. and Korea both wanted to control the women as a resource. The U.S. military hierarchy saw the prostitutes as a means for boosting the morale of male soldiers; Korea did not want American GIs and American dollars to go to Japan for R&R (Moon, 1997, p. 47). In surveys from the 1960s and 1970s upwards of 80% of soldiers reported having “been with” a prostitute. One U.S. Army captain cited peer pressure as the culprit. Upon immediate arrival soldiers were pressured to “try a prostitute.” Even soldiers who were morally opposed to this often ended up participating (Moon, 1997, p.
37). The group norm made visits to prostitutes a ritual that enacted and affirmed bonds among male heterosexuals.

**Collective Attack**

Rape camps are an institutional strategy that makes enemy women collectively the spoils of war. As in institutionalized prostitution, sex is a collective activity, but in this case it is imposed on women rather than negotiated as a market exchange. Like prostitution, rape camps are aligned with the notion of women being a collective resource for a group of males to take advantage of, but they serve the additional military purpose of humiliating the enemy and attacking the morale of the men whose wives, sisters, and daughters are being raped. When rape is used as a weapon of war, male soldiers may be coerced into raping, even if they do not want to.

A Muslim woman named Ifeta reports that that during the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina: “It was always gang rape, they always cursed and humiliated me during it . . . the camp was like a fruit stand . . . or to put it better, a livestock stand. Anyone could pass by and just take whatever he wanted. The Serbs had the power” (Stiglmayer, 1994, p. 118). Senada, another Muslim woman, reported: “The commander brought different gangs who were supposed to rape me . . . Some men didn’t want to go along with it.” (p. 132). One woman pleaded with a soldier, saying, “Think of your mother, think of your sister... Aren’t you ashamed?” But he just said, “I’ve gotta do it, or else they’ll kill me” (p. 105).

Gang rape of a military woman soldier who is officially on the same side (not an enemy) also fits this category. Rapists may collectively assault any woman they see as a threat. Norms of militarized masculinity may also promote gang rapes as a bonding
experience for primary groups (Wood, 2009), somewhat analogous to collective visits to prostitutes.

Staff sergeant and decorated combat medic Sharon Mixon reports being drugged and gang-raped by U.S. soldiers during Operation Desert Storm. "I woke up face down on a cot. I was being held down. And there were six men taking turns raping me," recalls Mixon. "They told me that if I told anybody that they would kill me. I went and told the MPs anyway. And they told me the same thing." (Leung, 2005). Among women reporting one or more completed rapes during their military service, 14% had been gang-raped (Sadler et al., 2003, p. 266).

**Collective Professional**

A welcome counterpoint to the stories of sexual assault are the narratives of military women who work closely and effectively with men without such negative experiences. In the U.S. Navy, women work with men in close quarters and stressful conditions. Petty Officer Third Class Marcia Little, who worked on the flight deck of an aircraft carrier, reports that she “may have gotten hit on a lot, but it didn’t get out of control and she never felt like she was being harassed” (Holmstedt, 2007, p. 123).

Marine Corps Lance Corporal Chrissy DeCaprio also gained professional acceptance by her company as a fellow Marine. “She started as a gunner and later was promoted to team leader. The artillery Marines weren’t used to working with women because their military occupational specialty is closed to females. . . . One male gunner thought he was the best shot . . . until DeCaprio appeared on the scene and showed him up” (Holmstedt, 2007, p. 143).
While she was serving at the front during World War II, Malakhova also had many positive experiences with men in her unit. Although (as noted above) officers harassed and assaulted her, she felt safe among the rank-and-file male soldiers, even when sleeping among them in the trenches. Soldiers had a “chaste” attitude to the women, she concluded. “To them, we were all ‘little sister’,” she said. As sisters, servicewomen were off-limits sexually; sexual overtures would violate an incest taboo. As a male Soviet veteran put it: “We did not look upon them as women . . . You don’t marry your own sister, do you? They were our sisters” (Engel, 1999, pp. 143-144).

**Conclusion**

Accounts of women’s military experiences, as detailed above, illustrate a variety of ways in which the evolutionary logic of gender relations has played out. The three models of women that have shaped gendered relations in the military are all cultural accommodations that manage the tensions evoked by gender relations in the military. Two of them are compatible with sexual assault and exploitation; one of them is not. Although sexual assault in the military is still disturbingly common, military women clearly can and do earn the respect of their male peers. On ships, in frontline trenches, and in other contexts formerly reserved for males, they work with men in ways that promote, rather than damage, military effectiveness. This outcome is far more likely, we suggest, if cultural norms do not label women as intruders or emphasize their potential as sexual mates over their professional roles.

The last eight years have, for many in the U.S. military, eliminated any doubts about the effectiveness of women warriors. “Iraq has advanced the cause of full integration for women in the Army by leaps and bounds,” states Army colonel Peter R.
Mansoor, who served as executive officer to Gen. David H. Petraeus in Iraq. “They have earned the confidence and respect of male colleagues” (Alvarez, 2009). Eleven percent of the two million Americans who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001 have been women. According to Dr. Nagl, president for the Center for a New American Security, “We literally could not have fought this war without women” (Alvarez, 2009).

Our paradigm suggests that sexual tensions cannot be erased because they are structural. Yet male sexual coercion of women varies greatly in different circumstances and cultural contexts, so it is clearly is not an “immutable fact of nature” (Goldstein, 2001; Gowaty, 2003; Geary, 1998; Smuts, 1992, p. 24; see also Drea & Wallen, 2003). It is simply not the case that all men, if given the opportunity, will rape women. Many women in the military are sexually assaulted, and many are not. The prevalence of assaults should, we propose, exhibit clusters and concentrations rather than be distributed evenly.

According to our analysis, the continued high prevalence of military sexual trauma in the U.S. military indicates that cultural norms have not yet been sufficiently transformed across all services and ranks to aggressively counter the threat that military sexual trauma poses. We expect that more systematic data will demonstrate the “clumpiness” that we predict, with local variation in women’s military experiences covarying with the relative endorsement of different models. There is some evidence of varying prevalence of military rape, but at a very poor level of resolution—branches of service (Morris, 1996) or different Reserve components (Street, Stafford, Mahan, & Hendricks, 2008) rather than smaller units. Identifying specific pockets of severe problems can help guide effective interventions.
For military women, an understanding of how different models of women have shaped gendered relations in the military can inform their choices in navigating a potentially dangerous environment. The identification of sexualized workplaces as a risk factor suggests that lots of dating activity in a unit may raise the risk of sexual trauma by making gender more salient than professional roles (Sadler et al., 2003). Complete abstinence from heterosexual activity (the “bitch” or “dyke” options) is probably the strongest signal that a woman does not want to be viewed by men as a potential sexual partner. However, lots of military women are both single and straight, and, as Williams (2005) comments “Sex is not specifically prohibited for deployed soldiers…. So get real. The Army is not a monastery.” (p. 21). Dating while simultaneously evoking the positive brother-sister model of professional cooperation within one’s primary unit is most likely to work if women and men both seek romantic partners outside their immediate unit.

In civilian society, the threat of retaliation from male relatives is a potent deterrent to rape. In the military, where women are not surrounded by kin, military men could help deter rape by promoting the brother-sister model within their own unit. This can encourage brotherly vigilance against threats to their military “sisters” from outsiders, and evoking the incest taboo can deter advances from other soldiers within the unit. Unfortunately, brotherly vigilance may not deter attacks by men who are in the direct chain of command for all the men and women in the unit.

The role of men and women in leadership positions in establishing and enforcing appropriate norms is critical. The entanglement between gender dynamics and military organization makes the actions of officers particularly important in signaling what behaviors are acceptable. One study found that when officers permit others in their unit to
make sexually demeaning comments or gestures in the presence of a military woman, rape is four times more likely than when they do not (Sadler et al., 2003, p. 269). Far too many officers are using their rank either as a weapon of sexual coercion or to protect soldiers under their command who are attacking their colleagues. Rooting out this problem will require a transformation of military norms and practices beyond what rank and file military men and women can accomplish on their own.
References


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Endnote

1 Our focus in this paper is on the sexual assault of women by men in modern militaries. We recognize that military men are also victims of MST. However, the logic we are applying in this paper is specific to male-female relations and should not be generalized to male-on-male assault, which likely involves a different set of factors.