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Abstract
Recruitment is one of the Swedish Armed Forces’ (SAF) main challenges today. Recruiting more women into the organization is one of the organization's aims, as well as providing them with more opportunities for career development. The purpose of this article is to gain a deeper understanding of how female military officers perceive barriers and advantages on their way to higher leadership positions. A total of 10 women from a variety of backgrounds and positions in the armed forces were interviewed. Their ranks ranged from Captain to Colonel and they represented army, naval units and air force. The interviews were analysed using a Grounded Theory approach. The qualitative analysis resulted in two main themes: Supporting visibility of women as leaders and differentiation of women as leaders. The former concerns positive strategies on an individual and organizational level that support an increase in the number of female leaders in the SAF, and is a way of responding to political incitements and the SAF’s fundamental values. The second concerns ways how women are portrayed as different and divergent from the male standard. The suggested model may be valuable in recruitment, educational settings and leader development of high-level military officers from a gender perspective.

Introduction
Women’s rarity in powerful roles has historically been ascribed to phenomena such as the concrete wall, glass ceiling and ‘brass’ ceiling (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Iskra, 2007). These metaphors describe different barriers that women typically face on their way to becoming leaders. Lately, however, women have gained new access to a wide range of leadership roles. We illustrate with a quote from a Swedish Government report:

A Swedish man or woman now entering retirement, having grown up in the shadow of the Cold War and perhaps with a stay-at-home mum, has experienced great change. East and West, which were never supposed to meet, substantiated in barbed wire, walls and land mines, have in fact met. Women have become judges, officers, police, priests – even arch bishops, city councillors, university vice-chancellors, public prosecutors and more – none of these existed at the end of World War II. (Statens Offentliga Utredningar [SOU], 2014:6, p. 306)

Nevertheless, prejudice and discrimination still slow women’s advancement to higher positions. Eagly and Carli (2007) offer a new metaphor beside the glass ceiling and concrete wall: the labyrinth. This captures the varied challenges, attitudes, difficulties and obstacles confronting women on their way to high-level leadership. The problem is even more present in male-dominated organizations.
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such as law enforcement (Gossett & Williams, 1998; Poulos & Doerner, 1996), firefighting (Yoder & Aniakudo, 1997), and within military organizations (Boldry, Wood, & Kashy, 2001; Iskra, 2007; Sasson-Levy, 2003a, 2003b; Sasson-Levy, Levy, & Lomsky-Feder, 2011), entering combat roles (Segal, 1978).

The challenges women face in attempting to successfully penetrate and persevere in historically male-dominated work environments have been claimed to emanate from traditional gender hierarchies and norms that prevail in the family and society. Despite increased gender equality and empowerment, the household and the working unit has a traditional structure that makes men the dominant gender (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011; Cha, 2013; Hartmann, 1979; Prescott & Bogg, 2011; Segal, 1978).

At the same time, women aspiring to higher management positions may consider their sex and their behavioural style in light of where they work. They may receive more positive appraisal in sectors typically populated by women, but if they work in the many areas dominated by men, adapting their style to the more command-and-control approach may help them fit in (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). Nevertheless, there is still lack of research on women as leaders in military organizations because the military has always been a masculine institution (Alvinius, Starrin, & Larsson, 2016; Boulègue, 1991; Goldstein, 2001; Kimmel, 2004; Sasson-Levy, 2003a, 2003b) where ‘boys become men’.

According to Shields (1985), women as military leaders are few and far between, which means that female officers have few women serving as leadership role models. In Sweden, for example, the total proportion of women in the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) in 2014 was 13%, 6% among officers, 12% among soldiers and 38% among civilian employees, (Löfgren Lundqvist, 2014). At the higher command levels (brigadier generals), the proportion of women in the SAF was much lower (only three individuals).

In civilian contexts such as public administration and industry, research shows that mentors and role models can have a significant effect, especially in assisting women employees gain and complete high-profile projects important for their advancement (Mattis, 2001). Role models and/or mentors are important because individuals learn by doing and from watching others (Sims & Lorenzi, 1992).

Due to the small number of female leaders, stereotypical attitudes towards women in the military remain (Carreiras, 2006; Persson, 2012). In other countries such as the United States, the military also seem to suffer from poor institutional memory even if women have an honourable tradition of serving the country, particularly in time of war (Shields, 1985). According to previous research, there are several problems women face in their military leadership positions. One is gender stereotyping, which means that both men and women find it difficult to take orders from a woman. They may also fail to adapt to the complexities and unwritten rules in male-dominated organizations, which contributes to exclusion from leader positions (Riger & Galligan, 1980). It should also be noted that working women have a multitude of roles, for example, as partners and/or mothers. Belonging to different greedy institutions (Coser, 1974; Soeters, 2000; Vuga & Juvan, 2013) adds to the demands of these women's multifaceted roles (Iskra, 2007), and it is not clear how this affects their career ascent. Coser (1974) coined the term ‘greedy institutions’ to refer to organizations (such as military organizations and families) that place high demands on employees and/or members. Greedy institutions ‘seek exclusive and undivided loyalty, and they attempt to reduce the claims of competing roles and status positions on those they wish to encompass within their boundaries’ (1974, p. 4).

Similar results to those in a military context have been found in civilian contexts where lack of line experience, inadequate career opportunities, gender differences in linguistic styles and socialization, gender-based stereotypes, the old boy network at the top and tokenism are characterized as typical barriers for women becoming chief executive officers (Kanter, 1977; Oakley, 2000; Torchia, Calabrò, & Huse, 2011). A difference between the civilian and military contexts is that military organizations represent ‘the good citizen’, who is also equated with the male norm where men constitute the gender regime (Iskra, 2007).

It can thus be said that much research has been conducted on women as leaders, as leader positions (Ellefson, 1998; Holgersson, 2003; Iskra, 2007). Sweden has been regarded as one of the most gender equal countries in the world, with the highest proportion of feminists (SOU 2005:66). Sweden is one
of the top countries, ranked by the World Economic Forum, which judges countries on the basis of the following aspects: equality in economic terms, educational levels, policies and health. According to the World Economic Forum, Sweden was listed as number four in the overall ranking in 2011 (Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2011). Sweden has not actively taken part in a war since 1814, but has cooperated with a number of foreign countries in international peacekeeping and peace enforcement missions. Given the Swedish high gender equality ranking and the world’s longest history of peace, research on women in the Swedish military could add new insights, especially as the vast majority of the existing research has been conducted by military sociologists from countries where combat experience is common, such as USA and Israel.

Knowledge about Swedish women’s career climbing experiences in the military could therefore provide ‘front-runner’ insights of general value. However, existing gender-oriented research in the Swedish military context has mostly focused on sexual harassment and basic-level recruitment (Kronsell & Svedberg, 2011; Persson, 2011). The purpose of this article was to gain a deeper understanding of how Swedish female military officers perceive barriers and advantages on their way to higher leadership positions.

SAF – the context of the study

The SAF is subject to the Swedish parliament and the Swedish Government. The SAF, headed by Supreme Commander, is one of the largest authorities in Sweden. The central command of the armed forces is located in the Headquarters, which also houses the Operative Unit supervising missions in Sweden and abroad. Its predominant task is to command operations, but it is also involved in matters such as military strategy, the development of the armed forces and in acting as a channel of communication with the government. Army, naval and airborne units, as well as schools and centres, train the units which are then deployed nationally or internationally.

During the Great First World War and Great Second World War, including the cold war and throughout the twentieth century, Sweden maintained a national policy of non-alignment, while the SAF strength was based upon the concept of conscription. In 2010, Swedish conscription was abolished (until further notice). It was replaced with volunteer armed forces including the Home Guard – National Security Force. Currently there is an ongoing political debate on developing a new kind of conscription, including both men and women (Swedish Armed Forces, retrieved 9 September 2016).

Methodological approach

In order to gain as wide a variety of experiences as possible, the informants for this study were selected in accordance with the guidelines for Grounded Theory developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The empirical material is based on 10 interviews with military officers from the SAF, and all of them were women. The selection can be described as a convenience sample (Morse, 2007). More specifically, this means that with the help of already selected people, we came into contact with others through Officer’s Advanced Programme at the Swedish Defence University and through a point of contact at headquarters of the SAF.

The group of women, aged between 35 and 50, came from three branches of defence: The Army, The Navy and The Air force. All the participants were ranked from Captain to Colonel and had between 15
and 25 years of work experience with the SAF. Having progressed in their military careers for a considerable length of time, they still had the opportunity to climb the career ladder (Table 1).

The interviews conducted for this study followed a previously determined interview guide consisting of open-ended questions, followed up with individually tailored questions. The themes chosen were as follows:

- Background information.
- How would you say women leaders/bosses are viewed in the SAF?
- How would you say the recruitment of women to higher positions is viewed?
- In your view, are there any factors encouraging (or discouraging) the recruitment of women as bosses (in higher positions)?
- What do you feel about the recruitment of women (and men) on the basis of their competence?
- How do you identify/find women (and men) to be bosses/leaders in the organization?
- How would you like to be supported in your career?

Ten interviews were conducted in the period January–March 2014 (eight interviews) and March 2015 (two interviews). All the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were collected at Swedish Defence University and one by the telephone because of the geographical distance and work situation. Eight interviews were conducted by a member of the study project team and two by the main author of this article. The interviews were subsequently analysed according to a Grounded Theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Starrin, Dahlgren, Larsson, & Styrborn, 1997). The first step in the analysis consisted of so-called open coding, which implies identifying significant elements, i.e. codes in each individual interview, which may concern, for example, certain patterns of thoughts, feelings or behaviour relating to the interview topics. We began analysing the transcribed interviews at the start of the research process. Here is an example of a quote:

I think it would make it difficult (to be recruited as bosses, author’s note) if you have the guts to stand out, perhaps not share the same view.

This quote, along with several similar quotes, was coded as ‘standing out makes it more difficult to be recruited as bosses.’ Step two in the analysis involved evaluating and then categorizing the codes with others of similar content. The above example was sorted under the subcategory ‘excluding the individual’. This category was then sorted under the main category, ‘Construct of women as divergent’. Further, this category was sorted under the overarching category ‘Differentiating women as leaders’, which, along with a further overarching category ‘supporting visibility of women as leaders’, led to the emergence of the core variable: managing visibility and differentiation in recruitment of women as future potential leaders. The final conceptual model consisting of a core variable, overarching categories, categories and codes is presented hierarchically in the results section that follows.

Results

The interview analysis reveals that the main concern for recruiting women in the military context is managing visibility and differentiation of women as future potential leaders. Our results can therefore be divided into two main themes: Supporting visibility of women as leaders and Differentiation of women as leaders. The former concerns positive strategies on an individual and organizational level that support an increase in the number of female leaders in the SAF, and is a way of responding to political incitements and the SAF’s fundamental values. However, since the SAF is traditionally a male-dominated organization, there are forces that have a negative impact on the development of women as leaders and that can be described as differentiating and making women invisible. These strategies exist on an individual and organizational level and counteract positive measures, thus holding women back and preserving the traditional male-dominated system. The main results of this study are presented in a theoretical model (Figure 1).

The model’s overarching categories and categories are discussed in more detail below.
Supporting visibility of women as leaders involves individual and organizational strategies and measures that facilitate the progress of women into leadership positions in their own organizations. Making women’s skills visible and the provision of support from subordinates, colleagues and superiors appear to be central aspects in a process that promotes women’s career trajectory. More concretely, it may be about women personally taking the initiative to occupy more ‘space’ and assume responsibility, being active in various networks and having the confidence to ‘be the best’. On an organizational level, it relates to the provision of formal and informal support from bosses, colleagues and subordinates. Role models are also important – both men and women who ‘point the way up’.

Individual strategies
The data reveal two individual strategies to improve visibility: professional networks and proactive measures to occupy more space. We illustrate these strategies below.

Professional networks are highlighted in the analysis as a central aspect. It is crucial for women to flag their existence by being visible in such a network. This visibility can be achieved by participating in social groups, social media, being accepted into the right groups and being liked by the right people – in general having a wide range of contacts. The following quote from an informant discussing participation in professional networks illustrates this:
So if you want to succeed, succeed in the SAF, I think you will. I think you have to be accepted into the right groups … I think you have to be active in them and not just accepted into them; I think you have to have the courage to put your best foot forward in a way that aligns with your boss’s approach and maybe deliver not just the answers but something that is much more in-depth and thought through. You have to be able to use the language – not just combat terminology but really kind of know all that bureaucratic defence gobbledygook, because it exists. Be loyal to your boss, deliver in time, step up.

The quote illustrates that participating in the relevant context was not perceived as sufficient; strategies are also needed in order to come forward in the best light. It also indicates the women’s desire to signal not just expertise, but also loyalty to their superiors.

Another pattern evidenced in the data concerns the necessity of having ‘access’ to women as colleagues or at least ‘within reach’. At the start of their careers, the women did not feel a need to compare themselves to other women – they wanted to be individuals. However, as they became more senior in terms of professional experience, a need for support from other women arose, as well as a need for social networks. The quote below illustrates the core support that one of the more experienced informants perceived she gained from a female network:

Yes, I think I get a hell of a lot out of it, I mean the support, and you can talk and meet up and share your successes and your challenges and discuss different things, exchange thoughts and ideas, support one another – and that means so much to me.

The other strategy we have identified, in terms of proactive measures and occupying more space is revealed in the women’s expressing motivation to pursue clear career goals, to take responsibility, be part of things and influence their work. The informants were able to identify areas of activity that needed to be developed and two described their own individual strategies to more positively influence their careers.

Deal with issues … step up and take more responsibility … for both activities in the work place and the organisation as a whole.

But I think I’m seen and heard by those around me and by the bosses and others … you have to demand a little respect in order to get some, you just do. You can’t just sit there and expect it to be served on a platter either, but after a while you get so good at spotting the ones who throw their weight around more or less consciously and those who, without openly flagging it, actually have opinions about females being around … so I know who they are and how to approach things so to speak.

The above quote highlights the importance, not only of being proactive, but also of being able to discern which individuals are antagonistic towards women’s visibility in the male-dominated organisation and how to approach them.

Organizational strategies
In addition to the individual strategies discussed above, the data identified five organizational strategies that can strengthen recruitment and facilitate the visibility of women as leaders: The support of superiors, mentoring and coaching, support from subordinates, formalised structure for career development and role models.

The meaning of support from superiors and mentoring emerges from the empirical data, although our informants report a dichotomous view of female leaders – for or against – and emphasize the importance of having a boss who is clear about their stance. The below quote illustrates the importance of support from superiors and the meaning of its absence.

Maybe that he or she is clear about their stance on these issues. Then it’s not that unofficial stuff that I talked about at the outset, outwardly saying one thing is important but then inside, not really knowing what you think. Because you can see it; right now I have a boss who I know thinks female leaders are a good thing, because I can kind of feel it when we discuss things.

Mentoring and coaching is emphasized by the informants as important, and stems from a need that has not been met. They highlight the importance of having someone to seek advice and support from and to act as a sounding board.

It would have been good to have someone to bounce ideas off and reflect together and kinduv’ talk.
Mentoring/coaching is also seen as a way of making a woman's individual worth visible to her, and it is therefore viewed as being important early on in a woman's career.

I think a little coaching and mentoring would help a lot of women realise their own worth actually. But it has to come quite early on in her career – you can't just postpone it until you've worked 10–15 years – I think that's a little too late.

Unlike individual strategies for occupying more space, support from subordinates is highlighted in the data as being an important resource, because it is interpreted as showing acceptance of women becoming leaders.

So, as it stands now, my subordinates – they've actually, when I've had my progress chats with them – they've all said, without me having to ask them, that they think I do a damned good job.

Several of our informants had role models in the defence and associated with the SAF and described which individuals had inspired them in terms of leadership and motivation to apply to the SAF. There is hope in a generational shift, in which female role models in the SAF become part of the organizational memory, i.e. part of the organization's common history and identity (Mills, 2002). The informants' narrative can be interpreted as their perception that part of the problem lies with generational differences between men in the organization. Consequently, their reasoning rests on the hope that a generational shift will in itself lead to change. In addition to pointing out the prevailing dichotomous view of women, our informants also pointed out several good examples of women who have had a positive effect in the armed forces.

Well, it's a mixed bag, in my opinion; I've had really good female bosses. I've had a few over the years and I've had really good female bosses who have been good at running things and leading staff and handling staff issues, and they've done excellent jobs in their respective posts.

Another organizational strategy involves the informants' belief in a formalised structure for their career development. One aspect of this is the importance of long-term thinking and planning for the recruitment of women and that women are asked the question: What do you want from your career? An example of this can be seen in the following quote:

Making a plan, a long-term one, and encouraging making contacts associated with that, to anchor things elsewhere too if the idea is to, for example, 'yeah, we need a Chief of staff in 2–3 years'; 'OK, where?'; 'There', and you make contact. 'We think NN should be Chief of staff over there.' But that conversation has to be supported – 'What do you want? What d'you think?' And it's interesting to hear what he thinks you're suited to doing.

This quote makes visible the small but important steps that can contribute to formalizing long-term planning. The strength of formalizing such support is that it transfers responsibility to the organization, thus reducing reliance on individual-dependent support.

The overarching results highlight both variety and conflicting interests in what the informants perceive to be support and strategies, which can to some degree reveal how their experiences have been shaped by the environment they find themselves. For example, different opinions about women as leaders may reflect personal experience of female bosses and of how these have lived up to one's expectations of a (female) boss. Although we have given many examples of individual and organizational strategies in regard to the main theme of Supporting visibility of woman as leaders, this does not mean they are equally important to all individuals and organizations. For example, one may assume that the pattern of formalizing supportive practices may be central, as it involves institutionalization of the said practices, thus contributing to giving women more space in the organization, irrespective of the nature of their immediate work place.

**Differentiation of women as leaders**

Our second main theme is differentiation of women as leaders, concerns making female officers invisible or differentiating them from male officers. In this case, the women are portrayed as different and divergent from the male standard, thus reducing their chances of climbing the career ladder. Differentiation
targets individual women as well as women as a group. This is reflected in our account below, and we discuss the patterns that emerge in these two areas.

The construct of women as divergent

The analysis reveals three different ways of describing how the construct of women as divergent in the armed forces is formed. These are: self-criticism and lack of self-confidence and excluding individuals.

From the data, rich narratives repeatedly describe how women insufficiently step forward or show off their strengths – thus not appearing to be ‘sure enough’. Instead, they appear to be self-critical and are perceived as having lower self-esteem, which further contributes to differentiation. We interpret this as an expression of self-criticism and lack of self-confidence as exemplified by the following quote:

"Because I also feel that women are a bit more self-critical than guys. Perhaps we aren't good at beating our chests and saying 'I'm really good at this, choose me.' Instead we just say 'Yeah, but these are the things I'm not good at…'
Perhaps we highlight our weaknesses more than we highlight our strengths.

The quote indicates that perceived characteristics and weaknesses are attributed to women. Thus, the categorizations of ‘women’ and ‘men’ are described as something that ‘just are’ as opposed to being something constructed and negotiated by the environment. The experience of lack of self-confidence was accentuated by the negative impact of organizational, male standards and culture. Standing up and having the courage to express a viewpoint can single women out in a negative fashion. The fear of being excluded can mean a woman chooses to sit in silence rather than express her opinion.

"If you think someone’s good … you might say so and bring them into focus. But you might not have the courage to do that because you know that those particular people over there – they won’t like it.

Another aspect identified in the data is excluding of individuals. The informants testify to their gender still being perceived as a problem in relation to the male standard of the armed forces. One interview response describes how male colleagues expressed doubts about a woman joining an international mission unit:

"For God’s sake, I thought. There have been women in the SAF in Afghanistan working together for ages – it’s been just fine. Perhaps they weren’t working as closely with the Afghan army then, but on that point they thought it was somehow scary to have to ‘oh, are we going to have like ensure her safety too in respect to the Afghan soldiers’. All of a sudden, it’s all about her safety and no – no women can come along.

Another interview response to this theme highlights how the informant in question had clearly been contacted by unit command for recruitment purposes, but that shortly thereafter had been discouraged by the ‘lads’, i.e. her own male colleagues, from taking the position she had been offered.

"Less than an hour after that superior had left, three colleges came and told me that this was no job for a woman, that I shouldn’t attempt it – there was a tacit understanding that I wasn’t welcome.

Differentiation via organizational practices

Organizational practices that contribute to differentiation involve excluding women from participating in activities in different ways. For example, short term solutions such as rotating roles can sometimes be perceived as unfavourable to women. Homosociality and less tolerance of mistakes when made by women are other obstacles to women’s career progression. Quite simply, the organization is unable to adapt to the increasing number of women and women’s conditions for becoming leaders.

A pattern emerging from the data is the attitude towards sexism and its influence on the marginalization of women. The informants put special emphasis on the fact that awareness of sexism is as marginalizing for women as sexism itself. For this reason, women criticize other women who bring attention to its existence within SAF.

Some of the female collective see gender racism in everything. I think a lot of them have quit – those with that attitude. Because it doesn’t work in the long term – because then you kind of become a… it’s hard to blend in.

The informants talk about a certain attitude or approach to the organization and its culture that they call ‘gender racism’ and that exists among some women. This refers to a generally negative attitude that only focuses on a power struggle between men and women where women are constantly suppressed.
The informants say that this view/attitude has a negative impact on the women inasmuch as they do not want to/cannot or are not permitted to adapt to the system and its standards and culture.

The informants highlight how women's working methods differ from men's and from the prevailing culture and standards, which can be understood as yet another practice that creates differentiation between women and men. The quote below gives evidence of a pattern in which women relate that they not only work in a different way to men but also that this is not looked upon favourably.

The fact that you have a different way of making decisions that … the men in this context perceive as cumbersome, perhaps because you're trying to achieve some kind of accord and consensus, get as many on board as possible in order to make it more effective later. So I think it's more about differences in working methods actually, or slight differences, there's probably a culture clash, because we work in slightly different ways. We think a bit differently and not everyone accepts or likes that.

A pattern emerging from the data is Evaluation using different yard sticks, which concerns a number of aspects such as a demand for higher competence from women than from men and less tolerance for women making mistakes. The analysis reveals that women have to be far more skilled than men at the same level in order to advance in their careers.

Yes, but again, I think you have to be kind of so good, ridiculously good, to have a chance, I think.

Moreover, according to one informant, there is less tolerance for women who make mistakes than men.

I think, I feel that the demands are higher in some way. You have to be a bit more skilled, stand out a bit and really not, better not make any mistakes along the way which can sort of blacken (your reputation); because you have to carry, you have to carry your mistakes with you for much longer as a girl than a guy in this organisation.

Homosociality is a particular organizational practice that is viewed as unfavourable towards women. The informants perceive themselves to be a disadvantaged minority, which is created and perpetuated by men's tendencies to choose other men. Two quotes illustrate this awareness of how women experienced homosociality:

So it's a disadvantage for women that we're such a minority. So when you end up in nomination and voting process and stuff, people have a tendency to choose individuals who are like themselves.

Men choose men, women choose women and as long as we are disadvantaged in terms of numbers then more men will be chosen, whether we're on … are more skilled or whatever, you chose someone like yourself.

Spreading rumours is an organizational practice that affects women and generates the view that women on the whole make inadequate leaders. The rumours concern various things – in this context they may be about whether the women are sufficiently skilled to perform their tasks.

This feeling, or what I've heard about then, about women and bosses I've had personally who have a slight streak of 'No, but they don't have particularly good expertise in a certain field'.

This quote illustrates the perceived presence of rumours that support ideas about the differences between men and women and how this not only produces a construct of men and women as different but also positions them in terms of ‘better’ or ‘worse’ leaders.

Our second main theme highlights that the differentiation of women as leaders occurs through an interplay of individual and organizational attitudes and actions whereby women are differentiated and made visible in a negative light but made invisible in the process of recruiting leaders. This reasoning also reveals the now well-documented logic that viewing men and women as different has consequences for hierarchical positioning. Thus, the illustrated patterns link to Tilly's (1998, 2003) reasoning that long-standing inequality is based on accessibility to the categorization. From this perspective, the above illustrated discussion about the differences between men and women can be understood as the central cornerstone upon which hierarchical positioning is constructed. The presumption of differences illustrated in the informants' narratives illustrates a central exclusory practice. In Tilly's (1998, 2003) words, it is the apparently innocent character of differentiation, its accessibility and repetitiveness over context that creates lasting boundaries and inequality.
Discussion

The aim was to gain a deeper understanding of how Swedish female military officers perceive barriers and advantages on their way to higher leadership positions. A theoretical model was developed according to which the key aspect involves the management of visibility and differentiation of women in recruitment processes. Both kinds of management involve individual as well as organizational aspects. Looking at the suggested model – and the management of organizational-level differentiation of women in particular – the categories derived from the informants' stories are well in line with findings from previous research (Holgersson, 2003; Iskra, 2007; Sasson-Levy, 2003a, 2003b; Sasson-Levy et al., 2011).

Holgersson (2003) discusses the recruitment of women leaders in a civil context and Iskra (2007) elite military women. Both studies show that from a selection of applicants or hand-picked individuals, an evaluation is made of who is most suitable for the post. This evaluation is made on the basis of a number of criteria which is to guarantee that the candidate has the necessary competencies and qualities. In addition to formal skills, normative social criteria and cultural forces are inevitable aspects of the evaluation. Social aspects are evaluated from the notion of an ideal – culturally this means the person should ‘fit in’ and have ‘the right’ standards and values. Holgersson discusses how women’s performance is often interpreted as less valuable and efficient than men’s. Men and women are attributed with different qualities, from which their potential is assessed. According to Holgersson (2003), the constructs of leaders and leadership stem from male norms or standards. As a result, women’s leadership tends to be evaluated on the basis of the prevailing male norms for leadership.

Summing up, most, if not all, aspects found in the present study, can also be found in the existing literature regarding both civilian labour market and military context (Kanter, 1977, 1993; Persson, 2011; Prescott & Bogg, 2011; Shields, 1985). So what then has this study contributed in terms of new knowledge? Two theoretical contributions are suggested. First, despite the fact that Sweden has a long tradition of being top ranked regarding gender equality and having the world’s longest unbroken period of peace, this was obviously not enough to make a difference when it comes to the recruitment of women leaders in the SAF. Thus, relying on broader societal trends does not appear to guarantee similar patterns in the male dominated military organization. This calls for a need of more organization-specific efforts to alter the situation.

A second theoretical contribution is the central importance ascribed to leadership by the informants. Iskra (2007) states more generally that interpersonal relations, formal and informal, and support from mentors, male role models, husbands, co-workers and other who ‘open the door of opportunities’, are not available for every woman in her carrier. Both Iskra’s and this study shows that the social support provided, may be a key. However, the importance of a transparent, well structured, formal leadership has not been as emphasized.

Favourable leadership behaviours include being a good role model and providing various kinds of support (e.g. practical, informational and emotional). Unfavourable leadership behaviours may consist of exclusion by not seeing women as equal applicants and by unfair evaluation of women’s performance, such as by playing down good achievements and exaggerating mistakes. The favourable leadership behaviours fit well into theoretical models such as transformational leadership (Bass, 1998), development leadership (Larsson et al., 2003) and indirect leadership (Larsson, Sjöberg, Vrbanjac, & Björkman, 2005; Yammarino, 1994). The unfavourable behaviours can be found in models of destructive leadership (Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, & Hetland, 2007). However, and this is our point, these leadership models could be strengthened by taking the suggested gender-related visibility and differentiation aspects into account.

Taking this discussion one step further, it may not be so much the leadership behaviours that need to be altered in the leadership models, but rather the writings on underlying self-awareness and interpersonal perceptions. For example, authentic leadership theory (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005) emphasizes leaders’ self-awareness regarding ideals, motives and goals, although gender-related aspects are missing. Thus, if the results of this study can lead to enriching dominant
leadership theories, this would be a valuable contribution. Such leadership theory expansion will hopefully also have a positive impact on future leader development and actual leadership behaviours.

In conclusion, it should be mentioned that this investigation is a case study, and as such, does not permit generalizations. However, this was not the goal of this qualitative study. In the general terms of Glaser and Strauss (1967), ‘Partial testing of theory, when necessary, is left to more rigorous approaches (sometimes qualitative but usually quantitative). These come later in the scientific enterprise’ (p. 103). It should be emphasized that the concepts derived from the data may be of a sensitizing, rather than a definitive character, to use Blumer’s (1954) words. It should also be noted that the study relies on self-reported data only. These may be inaccurate, and a broader range of data would have been desirable. Although the interview data are based on a limited number of informants, it contributes to our understanding of high-level military leaders’ development from a gender perspective.

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