



The Women, Peace, and Security Norms as seen by Norwegian Male Officers¹

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how male officers in the Norwegian Armed Forces (NAF) understand the relevance of the global Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) norms in their conceptualizations of security work. The study is based on in-depth interviews with 13 Norwegian male officers, draws on a discourse theoretical framework, and feeds into scholarly discussions on security, gender, and diversity. The findings indicate that the WPS norms are seen primarily as tools for improving military overseas operations, and further, that gender equality is seen as a 'natural' part of Norwegian identity, including the professional identities of military personnel in the NAF. WPS norms are therefore perceived as less relevant at home than abroad. We argue that this is because the attitudes toward gender issues that the officers regard as 'natural' interact with other gender roles and cultures in overseas operations, and therefore pertain to distant 'others' more than to the 'self'.

KEYWORDS

Gender equality / international operations / Norwegian Armed Forces / Women, Peace, and Security

Introduction

In the scholarly literature on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) – an interdisciplinary field of scholarship that emanates from and relates to UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions – the role of the military is often overlooked. This is unfortunate, because the military plays an important role in ongoing efforts to realize the ambitions of the WPS agenda (see Egnell et al. 2014, p. 2). The WPS norms are a 'work in progress' – that is, they constitute a body of international norms where different practitioners, such as the military, play a significant role in converting political aims to meaningful practice (Davies & True 2019, pp. 4, 6, 11; see also Krook & True 2010, pp. 108–109, 122–123).

Military officers – as military professionals involved in leadership in different ways in the military organization – constitute an important group of security practitioners. Their task, among many, is to contribute to operationalize the WPS agenda when solving

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military tasks, addressing threats, and restoring order and peace. But how to do this is not straight forward. Our study investigates how male military officers in one of the most gender equal countries in the world, Norway, do this by asking: *how do male officers of the Norwegian Armed Forces (NAF) understand and make use of the normative framework articulated in the Women, Peace, and Security agenda in military activities?*¹

We have carried out interviews with 13 male officers during the year 2020. Drawing on a discourse theoretical framework, we identify three overarching discourses in the officers' understanding of the WPS norms. These discourses are about *gendered norms*, their relevance for *security*, and *cultural differences*, respectively. Furthermore, stories of frictions between different understandings of the WPS norms, and between these norms and other norms in the military organization, are central to the analysis.

There is an established scholarly literature on gender equality in the NAF (see for instance Lilleaas & Ellingsen 2014; Rones 2015; Totland 2009), but the WPS framework is a minor part of this body of literature (with some exceptions such as Kvarving 2019; Schjølset 2014; Skjelsbæk & Tryggestad 2010). The international literature on WPS and the military has primarily focused on international operations (see for instance Deiana & McDonagh 2018; Westendorf 2019) and on increasing female recruitment to national and international armed forces (see for instance Rupesinghe et al. 2019). Few studies have focused on male perceptions of WPS, and this article, therefore, brings new insight into the evolving scholarship on military organizations and the WPS agenda.

Women, Peace, and Security as a global normative framework

The adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in October 2000 forms the cornerstone of the WPS agenda within the United Nations. Resolution 1325 focuses on women's participation in peacebuilding; on the prevention of gender-based violence and women's protection from such violence; and on women's inclusion in post-conflict relief and recovery activities. It also calls on the international community, including UN member-states such as Norway, to do more to include women in all matters related to international peace and security. Nine further resolutions have since followed [UN Security Council Resolutions 1820 (2008), 1888 (2008), 1889 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013), 2122 (2013), 2242 (2015), 2467 (2019), and 2493 (2019)]. With the passing of these resolutions, a new way of thinking and operating was placed on the agenda of the UN, its member-states, and various multilateral security organizations (see Tryggestad 2009; George et al. 2019). It rapidly became clear that the task of ensuring the inclusion of more women in peacebuilding and peacemaking efforts would require both civilian and military engagement.

Critical voices, however, have argued that progress in realizing the WPS agenda has been slow (Kirby & Shepherd 2016, pp. 374–378; Tryggestad 2009). Indeed, Davies and True (2019, p. 4) describe the WPS agenda as

characterized by tensions and ambivalences as state and non-state actors struggle, compete, and collaborate to define and implement the atypical security agenda ... expected to challenge the patriarchal normative framework and unequal political economies that underpin peace and security institutions, but, at the same time, to actively engage with these very institutions to transform gender power relations.

Davies and True (2019, p. 11) go on to point out that ‘scholars must be sensitive to how the WPS agenda will be directly encountered by peace and security actors on the ground, including activists, practitioners, and politicians’. The WPS norms must be filled with content – or ‘translated’ – when used in various contexts, including military contexts. As Egnell et al. (2014, p. 2) put it, ‘whether military organizations are seen as hurdles or supporters, they are impossible to overlook as key components in any strategy to promote women’s rights or a gender perspective in security affairs’.

Krook and True argue that while norms can be defined as ‘values, principles and procedures that are widespread and institutionalized’ (Krook & True 2010, p. 106), they are not static ‘things’ that are simply spread and internalized (Krook & True 2010, especially pp. 104–105, 108–111). Analyses of norms must, therefore, consider norms as processes with *internal* and *external* dynamics (Krook & True 2010, pp. 108–111). Personnel in, for instance, government ministries, armed forces, and police forces make interpretations of and debate what norms mean and how to put them into practice (internal dynamism), while also relating them to other existing norms (external dynamism). Accordingly, the WPS norms are frameworks which are continuously shaped and reshaped through practices in a military context. This has also been the foundation for our approach to the study of how officers in the NAF understand and make use of the WPS frameworks (for an approach similar to the one adopted here, see Elvebakken 2017).

The Norwegian context

Norway was one of the first UN member-states to adopt a national action plan on WPS, in 2006, and it has since played an active role in promoting the WPS agenda through various UN entities. It seems clear that Norway places considerable importance on positioning itself as a state actor to be reckoned with when it comes to gender equality in foreign and security policy. For instance, former Norwegian Foreign Minister Børge Brende (2013–2017) of the Conservative Party suggested in a speech on gender equality in Norwegian development and foreign policy that Norway might be considered something of a ‘superpower’ in this field (Brende 2016). Norway is a small state and there are few traditional foreign and security policy areas in which Norway might take on a global leadership role. Thus, the goal of promoting gender-equality norms in Norwegian foreign and security policy has been warmly embraced, as illustrated by the former foreign minister’s comment.

One explanation for this engagement might be found in the notion of *state feminism*, a term that was first coined by Helga Hernes in 1987. During the 1980s, according to Hernes (1987, p. 157), the Scandinavian social democracies appeared to have ‘the potential to be woman-friendly’. At the time, however, such an approach went against the skeptical view of the state that prevailed within many feminist milieus (both scholarly and activist), where it was customary to analyze the state system as a manifestation of general male domination and thus one of the core problems of patriarchal power. Drawing on historical analysis and contemporary observations, however, Hernes argued that, in time and given the correct socio-democratic conditions, the state could become an ally of the feminist cause (Larsen 2021). The question today, is perhaps whether the NAF could also play that role and whether the implementation of the WPS agenda could become an arena for such an alliance.

In 2016, gender-neutral conscription was adopted by the Norwegian parliament. The adoption of this change was made with remarkably little resistance. It was as if gender equality in the armed forces was the last barrier in the gender equal goals of the state feminist project. However, men still make up the majority of the NAF (Hanson et al. 2017, p. 8; Norwegian Armed Forces 2022, p. 9). Furthermore, there have been reports of sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and male comradeship, but these reports do not suggest that there has been an increase in reported incidents since gender neutral conscription was introduced (see Fasting et al. 2021). These aspects are not the focus of our study, but they exemplify factors that can contribute to make it difficult for, for instance, women to operate on equal terms with their male colleagues in the NAF (for studies on masculinities within the NAF, which could be a relevant topic in this regard, see Totland 2009; Rones & Fasting 2017).

Because men still outnumber women in the NAF, men's understanding and use of the WPS norms can impact how these norms are converted into practice (see Andreassen & Ingalls 2009, pp. 268, 273). Further, military officers, in our case male officers, are interesting to study because they are generalists with responsibility for 'leadership, command and control' (Ministry of Defence 2015, p. 26, see also pp. 6, 25–26). Part of their job is to prioritize and assess what is needed for the fulfilment of a particular mission or for solving a given assignment. Implementation of WPS norms must therefore have the leadership's support (see Kvarving 2014, p. 145; 2019, pp. 147–153).

Research design

To examine how male officers understand and use the WPS norms in their work, we adopted a discursive approach to norms informed by Krook and True (2010). We looked at how WPS norms were translated into 'sensemaking practices' (Krook & True 2010, p. 108). Discourses were understood as collective frames of meaning expressed in language and comprising specific normative and descriptive ideas. Individual sensemaking, choice-making, and acting were seen as based on discursive framing. Although discourses produced and *fixed* meaning, they were still in flux (Bratberg 2017, pp. 33–36; Dunn & Neumann 2016, pp. 24). The WPS sensemaking practices, or discourses, were *relational*, shifting, and entered relationships of friction (see Björkdahl & Gusic 2015). Differences in how these norms were understood by the officers (internal norm dynamism) were conceived as *intradiscursive dynamism* or friction between different interpretations of the WPS norms (on the constitution of discourses, see Dunn & Neumann 2016, pp. 118–121). How the officers linked the WPS norms to other norms relevant for their work (external norm dynamism) was thought of as *interdiscursive dynamism* or friction between the norms of the WPS discourse and those of other discourses *in the military field* (for more on interdiscursivity, see Jørgensen & Phillips 1999, pp. 84, 93–94, 143–144).

To explore the sensemaking practices outlined above, we carried out qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interviews reflected the officers' *personal* opinions, thoughts, and experiences. Furthermore, the interviews were 'locally and collaboratively produced' by the interviewer and the interviewee (Nikander 2012, p. 410). The conversations constituted 'empirical windows onto ... interpretative resources at hand to make sense of the world' (Nikander 2012, p. 410). The communal sensemaking in the interview setting enabled us to study and explore the discursive friction within the

WPS norms as well as the discursive friction between these norms and other norms and discourses in the military.

The interviews lasted approximately 1–2 h and were carried out in 2020, via phone or digitally due to distance and Covid-19 restrictions. The interviewees were recruited to the study via contacts in the NAF and referrals. Potential interviewees were contacted via intermediaries, and directly by phone or by email. We carried out 13 interviews.

The interviews were conducted in Norwegian, and the extracts in this article were subsequently translated into written English. The questions in the interview guide focused on WPS in the planning and conduct of operations and how the officers understood norms, tasks, and concrete measures associated with WPS. There were also questions about the officers' experience, their role as men in the NAF, concepts related to WPS, the concepts of human security and military effectiveness, and the interviewees' views on the work of the NAF with WPS.

The ranks of the interviewed officers ranged from OF3 to OF5 – that is, major/commander, lieutenant colonel/commander senior grade, and colonel/captain (Navy). There were interviewees from all three main branches of the armed forces, but most were army officers. We chose to use pseudonyms in this text to ensure anonymity of the interviewees. It was tricky to provide background information about the officers without making them recognizable, as the Norwegian military was a relatively small organization. We did not register the officers' age and education, but, based on their rank, we estimated that they were from approximately 30–35 to 55–60 years old. In general, officers holding the ranks of those selected for interview would have had many years of experience as military professionals, and often a cadet school education and/or other academic degrees or military education.

As a whole, the officers had experience from different types of international operations in various parts of the world. This was important for several reasons. First, international experience was an important career move; second, it meant that the officers had a comparative perspective on military organizations and military life; finally, the WPS agenda was often seen as an international agenda, rather than a domestic one (see, e.g., Shepherd 2016).

Our analysis started with a thematic organizing of the interview material. The approach had similarities with thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). We conducted a *latent* thematic analysis, that is, searched for 'ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations' as well as structures that 'underpinn[ed]' what the informants had said (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 84–85). We referred to these underpinning structures as discourses. First, we identified themes – that is, patterns in descriptions of understandings and use of the WPS agenda – based on having been referred to by several interviewees or being of particular importance for the research question (cf. Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 82). Then, the thematic organizing of our data analysis focused on internal and external dynamism of Resolution 1325, the use and understanding of the WPS norms, and collective identity constructions woven into these understandings.

In practical terms, interesting findings and recurring topics from the interviews were noted while listening to interview recordings or during the process of interview transcription. Through a close reading of these transcriptions, relevant parts were sorted into broad thematic nodes informed by WPS, literature on security and collective identity, and topics that occurred during the interviews. Different understandings of the WPS norms and various discourses involved in these understandings were identified from

close reading of statements and passages in the most relevant thematic nodes. We paid particular attention to the parts of the interviews in which we explored how the informants understood a passage from the Letter of Implementation in which the Norwegian Ministry of Defense had given WPS-related assignments to the Norwegian defense sector.

We identified three overarching discourses in the officers' understanding of the WPS norms. These discourses were about gendered norms, conceptualizing security, and cultural difference respectively, and will be discussed below. These discourses exemplified the instrumental and overseas-oriented approach to the WPS norms that we found examples of in our interview material as well as the tendency to regard gender equality as a natural part of Norwegian identity.

Discourses about gendered norms

The issue of how to make sense of the normative framework embedded in the WPS agenda and what the application of a 'gender perspective' meant brought out different reflections about gender during our interviews. Although various views were expressed about the challenges associated with translating the WPS norms into military practice, there was little evidence of outright opposition or strong reluctance toward WPS and gender issues. Rather, the officers expressed openness toward these norms.

First, it was unclear what a gender perspective might entail, and different actors understood the concept in different ways. Interviewees often associated a 'gender perspective' with cultural perspectives or analyses that helped them better understand the area of operation. A gender perspective was considered a tool for increasing military effectiveness or for conducting operations in a more considerate way – it had an instrumental purpose. However, interviewees also saw a gender perspective to mean *gender equality* as a question of rights, and more specifically women's right to participate in the military organization.

Albert found it difficult to grasp the concept of gender perspective and thought that different actors and persons imbued the concept with different meanings:

In one moment, I feel that it is used almost as a synonym for gender equality, and in the next moment it is used very generally, almost as in understanding the operational environment you are going into. (Albert)

Richard, on the other hand, commented: 'If you say "gender perspective," I think most people in the Norwegian armed forces would think that it is about the proportion of women, gender equality, and avoiding bullying and sexual harassment'. He also thought that what we might call a cultural approach to gender perspective might be more adequate than a gender-equality approach. Richard pointed at the relevance of a gender perspective in cases where gender is 'a weapon in the conflict or an instrument in the conflict' in areas with a different culture and different religions and where the military had been tasked with a protective role. Roger agreed that the concept of gender perspective was complicated. He described the gender perspective as follows:

Gender the way it is perceived and how the gender conditions are in an organization, in a society, and how that, then, affects us.... And not least how we, by taking a gender

perspective, can learn something about how society works and, possibly, how we can – don't get me wrong – use that in military operations. (Roger)

Second, in descriptions of how gender can factor into the planning and carrying out of operations, the term became even more unclear. Interviewees argued that it was challenging to know how to turn the WPS norms into practice. Richard explained: 'I do not have a clear picture of how I would have implemented this to get the effect we are after'. Sebastian provided more detail and said that he had the impression that WPS-related provisions were often included in the planning of operations, but that it was more a question of as a 'tick in the box', and he was uncertain about the impact of such an approach on the operations. Similarly, Richard's experience with the NAF's ability to solve its WPS related tasks was that:

One has somehow tried to convert it into some concrete measures. And then one has implemented those measures and then it is, like, check in the box. (Richard)

In operational planning, gender can be included as part of an analysis in which the political, military, economic, and social factors of a particular area of operation, along with infrastructure and information factors, are assessed (see Kvarving & Grimes 2016, p. 15; Lindberg & Foliant 2016, p. 73). According to Steve and Roger, however, gender was not necessarily considered a key factor in all contexts, though there were some exceptions. For instance, Brian referred to situations in which it had been necessary to only talk to men in an area of operation when the force did not have female personnel that could talk to women. In such cases, the operationalization of the WPS norms could be seen as quite straightforward: it is necessary to have women soldiers along. However, Brian underscored that, in some specific situations, they could not include female personnel or had to keep them in the car: 'in some areas ... we did, on purpose, not bring girls because we knew it would simply provoke'. Christopher mentioned an example in which he and his team had once taken along a female colleague when they were visiting an area where there had been instances of sexualized violence, in order to be able to talk to the female survivors: 'Most likely, they would not talk to a man, and we therefore brought a woman on that patrol'.

Charles had experienced that including gender as a factor was often understood in terms of having female personnel to interact with local women but thought that it should be also about analyzing the special needs of women in the area of operation. He missed a stronger emphasis on the root causes of the challenging situations in which many women found themselves, the devaluation of women in certain areas, and the fact 'that *men* are behind this, of course' (informant's emphasis). Charles thought it was important 'that one actually also addresses *men* to a much larger extent, that the *men* in the force must address the men in the area of operation' (informant's emphasis).

Third, the participation norm of the WPS framework was understood to mean women's equal right to participate in the NAF and during international missions. Christopher said that 'for me, it is completely natural that when we plan an operation, women participate in the same way as men'. The concept of participation also covers the participation of local women in the area in which an operation is taking place. This is a transformative understanding of participation, covering more than just women's

participation in military operations. Such an understanding was reflected in what Steve said about protection of women and women's participation:

Generally, the way I interpret it, it is that they [i.e. women – authors' comment] should be able to participate in society in the same way as the male part [of the population].... They shall have the possibility to vote ... go to school, get an education, and those things – get a job and become in a way a bit more independent and freer as a result. (Steve)

Few interviewees discussed women as political actors in the area of operation – for instance, as counterparts in peacebuilding efforts. The exception was in discussions about so-called female engagement teams and information gathering. Female engagement teams are made up of female personnel who can talk to women in places where this is challenging for male personnel. Referring to an instance of this, Steve argued that 'a female engagement team is a very good example of how one could conduct an operation in a way that also involves the female part' of the population in the area of operation.

Finally, the issues of participation and protection were seen as interconnected. Robert argued that, in certain cultural settings, such as in certain Muslim countries, it was not possible to protect women in the area of operation without having female soldiers in the force who could communicate and interact with them. He used the example of simple medical service sessions where the force needed female medical personnel in order to receive female patients: 'without that, it is completely impossible to manage. And, that way, we attend to the protection of the local women we get in contact with' (Robert).

Furthermore, discussions on protection and participation during the interviews revealed not only how the WPS norms were linked to, but also put in a somewhat tense relationship with, the rules of the law of armed conflict (the *jus in bello* or international humanitarian law). When discussing how protection of women and women's participation were included in plans for operations, Steve pointed out that 'those things are, after all, somehow universal for us. It is part of international humanitarian law also'. The WPS resolutions pay particular attention to women and girls, while also recognizing the gendered effect of war on men and boys. At the same time, international humanitarian law offers protection to all non-combatants (see Johansen & Staib 2009, pp. 190–192), and within this perspective, gender does not matter. The interview data contained examples that seemed to reflect such a gender-neutral approach to the question of protection. Robert argued that 'it does not matter whether you are woman or man. If you are a civilian, you are entitled to protection when it comes to combat situations. And, of course, we do our utmost to achieve that' (Robert). Morgan made a similar argument but pointed out that one had to have a particular focus on women, as 'historically, we have seen that women's sexuality is used as part of warfare'. These examples showed how challenges with using the WPS norms to complement International Humanitarian Law in practice took form.

Discourses about security

The analysis above shows that it was not necessarily a straightforward task to identify the relevance and use of the WPS norms in military work – that is, work related to providing security and protection. We therefore investigated how the interviewees talked

about and described security issues in relation to the WPS framework. Here again, it was difficult for the interviewees to grasp the direct relevance of the WPS norms for all aspects of security work.

First, there was some confusion about which security settings that were the most relevant for implementing the WPS norms. Brian articulated this problem by arguing that, in a typical Norwegian military contribution abroad, the WPS norms would not be relevant for the conduct of many daily tasks:

We drive from A to B in some village.... We solve a military task, which often is to talk to someone, or [go] out and see just to get a picture of how things are, to understand the situation. Or one is looking for someone or some equipment or some enemy stuff. And gender is not something one thinks about then. (Brian)

Similarly, Fred saw few practical implications of the WPS norms for the planning and carrying out of operations within his area of expertise, 'because we are not, like, close to the civilian population anyway'. Oscar had also experienced that the gender perspective was of limited relevance during an operation owing to limited contact with civilians. Beyond ensuring an inclusive working environment in one's own force, ensuring decent conditions for local persons working for the force, and sending own female personnel to meetings, etc., to create a good example for others, the WPS norms were simply part of a set of focus areas that the personnel had to 'keep ... in mind' and potentially act upon if something relevant occurred, he said.

Second, the relevance and use of the WPS norms seemed different in combat and stabilization operations. Combat operations involve more offensive and defensive activities – for instance, taking control of an area using force, defeating a designated enemy, or denying this enemy the possibility to reach its goals – whereas stabilization operations and stabilizing activities are directed at providing security and stabilizing an area as well as supporting civilian actors, often after a conflict. A big operation can consist of both combat and stabilization-related activities (Norwegian Command and Staff College 2019, p. 101; Kjølberg 2008, p. 24–25).

Robert pointed out that the purpose of the operation impacted how gender was included as a factor. He argued that, in combat operations aimed at improving the security in a particular area:

It is demanding to include this [i.e., gender – authors' comment] as a factor because it does not have any practical significance if we try to take control of an area together with the [national adjective omitted] forces to, let us say, increase the area where the security forces have control themselves. However, if we have succeeded in doing that, then the next phase comes. And that is more about presence and making sure that what we just have achieved does not disappear ... at once. Then this gender perspective comes in handy. (Robert)

Morgan explained that the increased gender diversity in the NAF was a positive thing because it improved analysis and decision-making. However, he doubted whether a gender perspective would have any particular relevance 'on the receiving end ... in war' as opposed to 'peace support operations', where the gender perspective was 'much more important', for instance with regard to protection from sexualized violence.

Third, a common argument in the interviews was that the WPS norms were associated with overseas operations rather than with operations within Norway. For instance, Steve argued that including gender as a factor in national operations was not as critical as in international operations: ‘nationally, this [i.e., gender – authors’ comment] is maybe not the biggest problem.... compared to an operation abroad’ (Steve). While acknowledging that it was necessary and important for the NAF to keep up with society’s ideals regarding gender and diversity, Albert thought that ‘much of’ the WPS agenda ‘comes from some experiences with international operations that I have some problems with seeing as universal, and particularly in a national defense context’. Some interviewees also gave examples of how the WPS norms could be relevant in a Norwegian setting, but these were mostly linked to issues about men and women living and working together. Similarly, Ronald said that he had worked with gender equality and levels of female participation in a national setting but associated the gender perspective with ‘operations on the ground in distant countries’.

Fourth, Egnell et al. (2014, pp. 27–28) point out that the WPS agenda challenges traditional perceptions of military tasks and, as a consequence, traditional measures of effectiveness – for instance, through the shift in emphasis from state to human security. Robert explained how the WPS agenda could be implemented in practice in a way that contributed to fulfilling the WPS agenda, as well as achieving Norway’s strategic goals within WPS, and demonstrating commitment to Norway’s partners in an operation. Referring to experiences from assessing and planning the training of female units in a local security force abroad, he explained that ‘we could both use our female soldiers to the absolute uttermost culturally, and, not least, we could obtain, let us say, small wins, for Norway in strategic terms also in a 1325 context’.

While acknowledging the importance of gender issues and the gender perspective, Morgan pointed out that it was important to keep in mind the nature of military operations and the context this created for personnel working with military tasks:

There are enormous consequences of doing things the wrong way. It is about life and death for very many people, and, in that perspective, this [i.e., the gender perspective or gender issues more broadly – authors’ interpretation] becomes, in fact, a bit secondary. (Morgan)

Viewed together with the distinctions between the relevance of the WPS norms for combat operations and stabilization operations, and in operations abroad and within Norway, such a perspective suggested that the WPS norms were not always seen as being compatible with other norms that operated within the military organization.

If we adopt a traditional and realist understanding of security, the role of a military organization is to deliver security for the state or nation, and in this way for the people living within its borders (Egnell et al. 2014, p. 28; Sheehan 2005, p. 6; Krause and Williams 1997, cited in Mutimer 2016, p. 90). Within such a state-centered approach, the WPS norms are more easily considered an add-on or placed in the second tier in terms of prioritization. Resolution 1325 and feminist security approaches seek to promote a more individual-centered understanding of security that includes a wider set of threats to personal security and thus introduce new ideas about the types of security armed forces should produce (Egnell et al. 2014, p. 28; Sheehan 2005, chapter 8, especially pp. 126–131).

Based on our interviews, it appeared combat operations (as opposed to stabilization operations more broadly) operated under a specific set of norms and logics and a

more state security-like frame of understanding. A combat situation could be short-lived and, in many respects, extreme, and required that individuals concentrated on solving the mission at hand. The high stakes and risks involved, along with the serious consequences of making mistakes, led to a narrowing down of the things that could be taken into consideration.

Later, in the stabilization phase, particular attention could be paid to women and other particular tasks, and there was then more room for – and indeed necessary to apply – a more human security and individual-oriented frame of understanding of security. Military operations could also be necessary to create a security situation from which one could work with other challenges within a given society or from which there could be civil activity in the area of operation, as suggested by Steve. Here, we saw the potential practical and theoretical tensions between the WPS agenda and the military field, and between the different understandings of security.

Discourses about cultural differences

The WPS framework appeared most relevant to the interviewees when they talked about international missions and overseas security settings. It was in narratives that involved the ‘other’, whose culture differed from the gender-equal sociopolitical culture of Norway, that the WPS framework became particularly clear and relevant to the interviewees. We saw that concepts of security and gender were linked together in a characterization of the ‘self’, which, in turn, was juxtaposed with a set of concepts that characterized the ‘other’ (for more on this analytical approach, see Hansen 2006, especially pp. 23, 41–46).

First, the attitude towards gender-related questions was seen as different – though in varying degree – in Norwegian and non-Norwegian contexts. Brian provided an example of this when he explained how the society in which he had been deployed abroad was very different in terms of gender equality and women’s rights from the society in which he had grown up. His experience was that the personnel in the local force he was helping to train were not open to the gender issues and norms that Western actors were promoting:

It produced the reverse of its desired effect, because it was pushing it too far with regard to the [national adjective of country in question omitted] culture. (Brian)

Robert explained that differences in the gender culture of what we refer to as the ‘other’ in our analysis – that is, the gender culture of the societies in the area of operation abroad – meant that it was necessary to have female personnel in order to ensure that an operation’s goals could be successfully implemented:

To succeed with some of our operations – and in particular stabilization operations – we need access to first and foremost the best persons of all and, not least, access to the female population and in particular in the operational areas that have an entirely different gender culture than what we have in Norway – and in the Western world, for that matter. (Robert)

When Charles talked about his international experiences, he said that he had met people with considerable knowledge and competency on WPS and gender issues, but had found

that the amount of interest and attention it received varied both within regional forces and within Western forces:

It is, as a matter of fact, the case with many Western forces as well. There is an *attitude*, one might say, to this that does not give evidence of it [i.e., WPS or gender issues more broadly – authors’ comment] being considered as particularly important or urgent. (Charles, informant’s emphasis)

While there was a sense of the norms’ relevance for concrete plans and operations among Charles’ male colleagues during his periods abroad, it was more difficult to talk about integrating gender into the organization as a whole or in training sessions: ‘It is almost not welcome and it is a bit made light of, and perhaps particularly by Western forces that feel that they really know this’ (Charles). Similarly, Fred described the ‘culture shock’ he felt when the foreign Western European officer lecturing on pre-deployment training explained how one should buy sex in the country to which they were going. With ironic understatement, Fred pointed out: ‘Such an attitude is a bit different from what we are used to’. Steve had experienced that the gender culture among the personnel of another Western army staff was far more segregated than that of his own force. He described it as a ‘very odd culture compared to what we have in Norway’.

Second, awareness of gender issues was constructed as a seemingly natural part of Norwegian identity. For instance, Sebastian explained how the codes of conduct proposed by an ally might include very detailed guidelines about gender issues. In Sebastian’s opinion, such rules were ‘natural’ for and would be perceived as a no-brainer by Norwegian personnel. He added:

I think the ideas and the theories and the things that form the basis of 1325 are much more incorporated in a Norwegian soldier, a Norwegian officer, regardless of their gender, than is the case in many other, well, NATO countries or, not least, UN nations. (Sebastian)

Brian said that he was ‘not worried that our soldiers do not treat everyone with respect, including girls. Because we are used to doing that at home’. Robert commented that he had felt a clear expectation that he should address gender issues during an overseas mission in which he had been involved. He argued that gender issues were implicitly a part of the mandate and the mission, ‘because Norway is the nation it is’. According to Roger, it was possible for Norway to show others that it was ‘natural’ – and well-functioning – for Norwegian forces to consist of both men and women working together and to have female leaders on various levels of the organization. When discussing the problems associated with implementation of the WPS agenda, Charles, on the other hand, thought that part of the problem was that attitudes toward women in the military among Norwegian military men of his generation and older were still not good enough.

Third, gender issues were seen as particularly relevant when the officers had been involved in missions in countries or areas where Islam was a major religion. Gender roles in Muslim countries were used as examples during the interviews. The use of such examples generally involved the construction of a collective identity, where a Muslim ‘other’ was implicitly juxtaposed against a non-Muslim ‘self’. However, this did not mean that the interviewees saw no nuances between and within Muslim societies with regard to gender roles and gender questions.

Christopher had experienced some expectations regarding the need to apply a gender perspective or to put gender questions on the agenda when he was posted in a country in which Islam was an important religion:

Because they are Muslim, you only met *men*. And I remember that we discussed this quite a few times ... what can we do to meet the other half of the population? (Christopher)

Similarly, Robert highlighted the need to include a gender perspective with regard to protection and participation in the planning and carrying out of operations, not only but ‘particularly in Muslim countries that we have been to’. Ronald said that ‘when we have come to countries – for instance, Muslim countries – one must understand that cultural difference and the gender perspective within it, [as well as the fact] that the role of women in the countries one comes to is different from their role at home’.

Finally, interviewees stressed the limited influence Norway had in the world compared to other more influential actors – such as a military coalition or alliance, or the USA. Norway’s role in planning, and thus the opportunities it had for influencing the use of the WPS agenda, was seen as limited in operations where Norway contributed as part of, for instance, a coalition or the UN. As Sebastian pointed out, Norway contributed with personnel and equipment to operations, but ‘the operational planning itself ... is done in the coalition or in the alliance’.

The argument was that more powerful states were needed for real change to be achieved. That said, the work of individual officers could still contribute to promoting the WPS agenda. Referring to work experience from an international context, Charles said that he had experienced no expectations from local leaders and colleagues regarding the need to apply a gender perspective or address gender issues. ‘So, I feel that I take these initiatives single-handedly, really’, he said about his own work with gender, while pointing out that his initiatives were rooted in priorities and wishes from central authorities.

Discussion

Our analysis suggests that officers struggle to find the relevance and meaning of the WPS norms in many contexts and situations related to the planning and carrying out of operations. However, as practitioners, through the different ways in which they engage with the WPS agenda, and with gender topics in general, the officers fill the WPS norms with content and thus contribute to shape these ambiguous and dynamic norms. Our interview material also reveals tensions between the WPS norms and other norms at play in the military organization.

The WPS norms became most tangible and relevant for officers when they were understood in relationship to conceptualizations of the ‘other’. It was as if the WPS agenda became clearer to the interviewees when the ‘other’ was characterized as culturally different from Norway and Scandinavia, and with different or less progressive attitudes to gender, gender equality, or the WPS norms. The ‘self’ (who was in opposition to the ‘other’) was characterized as having a ‘natural’ positive inclination towards and ability to follow up on the WPS norms, which formed part of the Norwegian identity. Accordingly, Norwegian society could be seen as having military personnel that were



good at WPS ideals and goals. See Table 1 for an overview of the differences between the constructed ‘self’ and ‘other’:

Table 1 The ‘self’ and the ‘other’ (inspired by Hansen 2006)

The ‘self’	... juxtaposed with ...	The ‘other’
Norwegian	↔	Non-Norwegian
WPS is natural part of identity	↔	Less progressive in relation to WPS or different attitude towards WPS
Non-Muslim (implicit)	↔	Muslim
WPS is not relevant	↔	WPS is relevant
Not influential	↔	Influential

The idea that norms and values like the WPS norms could be considered natural and integral to the Norwegian identity – and, by extension, possibly to the Norwegian military identity – possibly suggested that there was a perception among military personnel that the WPS norms had already been (at least partly) implemented as a result of the status of gender equality within Norwegian society. The distant ‘other’ was seen as ‘embodying’ the opposite of such an understanding and development.

Still, there were nuances and inconsistencies to such an analysis: The ‘self’ and the ‘other’ were not unitary entities, and the use of such a form of analysis led to the creation of stylized ideal-type analytical categories or discourses (Hansen 2006, pp. 51–52). Even though the ‘other’ could be characterized as less progressive or as having different attitudes toward WPS, the interview material also suggested that the attitudes toward the WPS norms and gender varied both within the ‘self’ and the ‘other’. For instance, one of the informants suggested that the attitudes of Norwegian military men were not good enough. Lilleaas and Ellingsen (2014, pp. 141–142), on the other hand, have found that most men in the NAF support gender equality and that men in the NAF are as positive toward gender equality as Norwegian men outside the military.

In a study of Danish men, Bloksgaard et al. (2015, pp. 164–166) have suggested that Nordic gender-equality policies influence normative masculinities in a gender-equal direction. It is possible that such gender equality policies have influenced the NAF as well, and how the WPS norms are used and understood by personnel in this organization, but this requires further research. The role of different types of masculinities would have been a highly relevant topic for future research. One could, for instance, have examined male officers’ work with the WPS norms against a background of inclusive masculinity (see Anderson 2009) or hybrid masculinity (see Bridges and Pascoe 2014) to learn more about the relationship between these norms, masculinities, and power structures.

Friction

Officers interviewed for our study emphasized the need for cultural gender sensitivity rather than the promotion of gender equality. Indeed, they expressed support for gender equality, but they also emphasized that gender equality was perhaps not *the primary purpose of*

the WPS norms. The interviews provided examples of how the participation norm of the WPS agenda was understood as women's participation in their country's own armed forces, which might be necessary to realize activities in gender-sensitive ways. At the same time, there were examples where officers understood the participation norm as also covering the participation of local women in the area of operation. The interviews suggested that the officers understood the protection norm as protection of vulnerable groups, but women and girls were not seen as vulnerable groups *per se*. This understanding and use of the WPS norms filled the norms with a particular and largely instrumental content in a military context and ascribed less importance to the transformative aspects of the WPS resolutions. This exemplified the internal dynamism (intradiscursive friction) of the WPS norms.

In addition, the interview material suggested that the WPS norms were understood as more relevant when operating overseas and in a different culture rather than at home. Some of the officers also seemed to consider the WPS norms to be more relevant in tasks related to protection of civilians and stabilization than in combat operations. Accordingly, the WPS norms seemed to be less compatible with the norms and frames of understanding of a state-centric approach to security than with those of a more human security-focused approach. Here, we could see the external norm dynamism, as different sets of norms and understandings of security and military tasks came together in relationships of interdiscursive friction. In the future, we might see a clearer normative shift towards state security in terms of how security is conceptualized as NATO member-states increase their focus on traditional defense tasks. Such a shift might trigger increased interdiscursive friction with the WPS norms and might further affect the understanding and use of the WPS norms in military settings (see von Hlatky 2019, pp. 371–373).

Our study also confirmed that the WPS norms were both work in progress and dynamic processes shaped by practitioners. This did not mean, however, that the development of the norms should be aimless. The WPS agenda highlights, among other things, the gendered impact of conflict and promotes increased participation and protection of women and their rights as well as the use of a gender perspective. Our analysis suggested that the achievement of incremental change in these areas through the careful work of identifying the relevance of the WPS norms in military activity by showing how they could help the NAF operate more effectively could be a potentially fruitful way forward. This was similar to what Egnell et al. (2014, pp. 6–7) found in the Swedish armed forces, where emphasizing the importance of the WPS norms for military effectiveness turned out to be a successful way of initiating their implementation. At the same time, making military personnel more conscious about the transformative aspects of the agenda and questioning the idea that gender equality and gender sensitivity came naturally to the Norwegian identity seemed to be important for ensuring that the agenda would not be diluted by an overly instrumentalist approach (see Kirby & Shepherd 2016, pp. 385–392). If this was true for male officers from such a gender-equal country as Norway, it could possibly be important also for military personnel with other backgrounds, though that was something that required further examination.

Conclusion

Our study suggests that the officers struggle to identify the relevance and meaning of the WPS norms in many contexts. The discourses that emerge from our interviews show

that WPS norms are considered most tangible and relevant when they are understood in relationship to the ‘other’. Further, the material suggests that the officers understand the WPS norms as a cultural perspective that helps the armed forces operate more effectively rather than as a gender-equality perspective. The norms are understood to apply more in overseas operations within a different culture rather than at home. Some officers also seem to view the norms as more relevant for activities such as protection of civilians and stabilization rather than combat operations.

This study of male officers helps us build knowledge on how the WPS norms as a work in progress and as dynamic processes are understood, used, and in turn shaped by a potentially influential group of military practitioners (see Davies & True 2019, pp. 6, 11; Krook & True 2010, pp. 109, 123). Although the military is an important institution in the implementation of the WPS norms in the field of security (Egnell et al. 2014, p. 2), the interviews indicate that there are challenges associated with bringing the military and the WPS and feminist fields closer together, also for male officers from the gender-equal context of a Nordic country. The interviews further suggest that using the WPS norms in a military context involves a narrowing down of the agenda in an instrumental rather than a transformative direction. At the same time, our findings propose that a pragmatic approach, as outlined by Davies and True (2019, pp. 5–7), can be conducive to the promotion of the WPS agenda in the military, and that such an approach currently seems to shape the WPS norms in that context. A pragmatic approach is interested in what works and what gives substantial change, that is, an approach which opens up for incremental change and the promotion of the WPS norms. What these findings might entail in a new security setting in Europe after the outbreak of war in Ukraine in the spring of 2022, remains to be seen.

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Note

- ¹ The article is based on and developed from Sindre Bæk's (2020) master's degree thesis, which was supervised by Inger Skjelsbæk.