Badass marines: Resistance practices against the introduction of women in the Dutch military

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Abstract
Gender and diversity interventions often do not have the planned effect, at least partly because of resistance. As a result, resistance is predominantly perceived as a negative to overcome. Contributing to theories on resistance to gender change, this paper increases our understanding of resistance practices and explores how these contribute to organizational change. Drawing on a case study in the Dutch military, we present a fine-grained analysis of the discursive resistance practices to the introduction of women in a previously men-only military unit. The paper brings together three strands of literature: on gender interventions, on organizational resistance, and on hegemonic military masculinity to unpack the nuances in resistance. We highlight the ambiguities and contradictions in the discursive resistance practices, and explicate how these entail shifts in organizational gender beliefs and the discourse on hegemonic military masculinity. We conclude that instead of trying to avoid resistance, there is a need to better understand what kind of change resistance is already putting into motion.

Keywords
gender equality intervention, military masculinity, resistance practices, women in combat
1 | INTRODUCTION

The question of how to create successful change toward gender equality in organizations has been a core issue for feminist organizational scholars for many years (Calás et al., 2014). While gender equality interventions have become more common in organizations (Doldor et al., 2016; Roberson et al., 2020), research shows that these interventions often do not have the planned effect (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Renemark, 2016; Leslie, 2019). Various studies suggest that resistance by organizational members is one of the main reasons gender interventions lack success (Bleijenbergh, 2018; Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2018).

Studies on resistance to gender interventions have focused on understanding the reasons behind this resistance, as they predominantly perceive resistance as a negative to overcome (Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014; Powell et al., 2018). However, this perspective does not take into account the positive role resistance may play in organizational change. Some authors (Courpasson et al., 2012; Ford & Ford, 2010; Lansu, 2019) have recently argued that change agents might be able to use resistance in their interventions. Consequently, there is a need to explore more deeply how resistance to a gender intervention can contribute to organizational change. To do so, we move away from labeling organizational members as mere resisters or proponents of change (Harding et al., 2017; Ybema et al., 2016); instead we focus on how resistance is discursively practiced. We employ a dynamic conceptualization of power and resistance (Fleming & Spicer, 2008; Mumby et al., 2017), which allows us to unpack the nuances, contradictions, and ambivalence in resistance (Thomas & Hardy, 2011; Van Laer & Janssens, 2016).

We draw on data from an extreme case: the introduction of women in the Dutch Marine Corps. The Marine Corps had been men-only since its founding, but in January 2017 the government forced it to open its ranks for women. We explore marines' responses to this gender equality intervention by analyzing interviews and field observations conducted a few months after the policy change had been implemented. As both the military and soldiering are strongly associated with masculinity (Muhr & Sløk-Andersen, 2017; Sasson-Levy, 2011b), an organizational discourse on hegemonic military masculinity is central in these responses.

This paper aims to contribute to the literature on resistance to gender interventions by showing how discursive resistance practices contribute to organizational change in the military. Our fine-grained analysis highlights the nuances, ambiguities, and contradictions in the discursive resistance practices and uncovers shifts in essentialist gender beliefs and the organizational discourse on hegemonic military masculinity. In the first section of this paper, we review the recent literature on resistance to gender interventions, set forth our conceptualization of resistance practices, and address the importance of hegemonic military masculinity in our case. The second section focuses on the research methodology and the third section presents our data. The analysis shows that while marines draw on well-known reasons to resist the introduction of women, the nuances and contradictions in their resistance practices also point toward shifts in their gender beliefs and in the discourse on hegemonic military masculinity. In the final part of the paper, we present our contributions by showing how these discursive resistance practices contribute to change, as the nuances and contradictions in their rearticulations of hegemonic military masculinity mean that dominant norms are subverted.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 | Resistance to gender interventions: Women in combat positions

In recent years, the number of gender and diversity interventions in organizations has increased significantly (Doldor et al., 2016; Roberson et al., 2020), yet research indicates that these interventions are often not effective—or are even counterproductive (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Renemark, 2016; Leslie, 2019). A core reason that is given for the ineffectiveness of gender interventions in organizations is resistance by organizational members (Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013; Van den Brink & Stobbe, 2014). This resistance is generally perceived as negative, as something
blocking organizational improvements, and as something to overcome (McCabe et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2018). Consequently, studies on gender interventions have addressed the motivations behind resistance, in the hopes of finding a solution to it. Research shows people resist because they wish to preserve the organizational status quo (Piderit, 2000), they fear losing privilege and power (Dick & Cassell, 2002; Wasserman et al., 2008), they perceive these kinds of changes as an identity threat (Ashcraft, 2005), or because these changes target people’s norms, practices, and values, and affect the organizational culture (Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013). Resistance to gender interventions can also be driven by organizational myths, for example, the persistent idea that discrimination is no longer an issue (Dick & Cassell, 2002; Lombardo & Mergaert, 2013) or that the organization is meritocratic (Humbert et al., 2019). Even if people do feel that gender equality is an important topic, they might resist change because they do not want to prioritize the necessary actions (Lansu, 2019).

In this study, we analyze resistance in a particular organization, namely the military. Studies in this field have shown us why the introduction of women in the military provokes resistance. Both the military and soldiering are strongly associated with masculinity, which is at least partly because the military historically has been mostly populated with men (Hearn, 2011; Muhr & Sløk-Andersen, 2017; Sasson-Levy, 2011a). Soldiering is thus seen as a masculine occupation and military masculinities are central in the organization’s culture. This link between the military and masculinity is crucial, especially for studying resistance to the introduction of women in combat roles, as combat is seen as the most masculine space (Crowley & Sandhoff, 2017; Goldstein, 2018). However, this construction of combat as the pinnacle of masculinity is relatively recent. Before World War I and II, women were excluded from any type of role within the military. Hagemann (2020) shows that the industrialized nature of the mass wars of the 20th century meant that women had to be accepted into military service. Consequently, military involvement itself could no longer distinguish men from women. Instead, participation in combat came to be seen as peak masculinity.

Reviewing the literature on (resistance to) women in combat roles, four reasons to resist the introduction of women come to the fore. First, women are considered too physically weak to serve in combat (Barrett, 1996; Muhr & Sløk-Andersen, 2017). Cohn (2000) shows how men in the US military use physical training standards to frame their opposition to women: if the standards are lower for women than for men this is seen as evidence that women are unsuited for the military; if the standards for women and men are the same, men claim that women pass them unfairly. Second, women are seen as mentally fragile (Goldstein, 2018), not aggressive enough for combat (Sasson-Levy, 2003), and thus in need of protection (DeGroot, 2001; Johnson, 2010; Nantais & Lee, 1999). Third, women are perceived as disrupting unit cohesion and operational effectiveness (King, 2017; Winslow & Dunn, 2002). Basham (2009) demonstrates how the British military claims that increased diversity will undermine operational effectiveness. The military emphasizes the importance of social bonding based on “being similar.” Consequently those who differ from the white, heterosexual, male norm are seen as disrupting operational effectiveness. Regarding the integration of women, issues such as sexual attraction are considered to further undermine the social bond within units (Herbert, 1998; Iskra, 2007; Sasson-Levy, 2003). The fourth and last main reason to resist the introduction of women in combat roles found in the literature is that it will lead to a loss of the military’s “masculine allure” (Sasson-Levy, 2003, p. 444) and that it disrupts the privilege of men (Goldstein, 2018) as soldiering and especially combat are so closely related to masculinity.

These studies have shown the many reasons why people resist and which reasons are frequently given to resist the introduction of women in combat roles. They show that gender differences are essentialized (Collins-Dogru & Ulrich, 2017; Woodward & Winter, 2006). The constructions of women as physically weak, mentally fragile, undermining the bond between men, and disrupting the masculine image of the military are often presented as clear-cut oppositions to change. Similarly, studies on gender interventions largely present resisters as antagonistic, and perceive resistance as a phenomenon to overcome. This paper conceptualizes resistance to gender interventions as a more nuanced practice. Insights from Critical Management Studies (CMS) and the broader resistance to change literature will enable us to unveil the nuances and contradictions in the resistance to the introduction of women in the Dutch Marine Corps.
2.2 | Ambiguity, nuances, and contradictions in resistance practices

Critical Management Studies literature on resistance generally aims to understand how employees resist organizational control. While resistance and control are often seen as binary opposites, recent studies emphasize how power and resistance are dynamic and interrelated, and may co-construct each other (Fleming & Spicer, 2008; Harding et al., 2017; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009; Mumby et al., 2017; Pullen & Rhodes, 2013). This perspective gives room for a more nuanced conceptualization of resistance, in which resistance can be ambivalent or contradictory (Piderit, 2000). For instance, resistance may both change and reproduce power relations—even simultaneously (Fleming, 2007; Mumby, 2005; Mumby et al., 2017). Furthermore, resistance is not always intentional or conscious (Dick, 2008; Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014; Wilhoit & Kisselburgh, 2017), and resisters may not consider themselves to be resisting, instead feeling that they are acting in line with the organization’s goals and beliefs (Ford & Ford, 2010).

Resistance is complex (Powell et al., 2018), not necessarily expressed the same by everyone involved in resisting (Courpasson, 2017), and people might express resistance and consent simultaneously. In addition, resistance is always situational and contextual; we need to take the context of the case seriously when trying to better understand resistance (Mumby et al., 2017).

In line with the binary perspective on resistance and control, literature on resistance to change often assumes oppositional identities: people are either a change agent or a resister. Multiple authors (Harding et al., 2017; Thomas & Hardy, 2011; Ybema et al., 2016; Ybema & Horvers, 2017) have emphasized the importance of letting go of this assumption of fixed identities. By locking organizational members into a position vis-à-vis change, studies run the risk of overlooking more nuanced or contradictory responses. While various authors have argued for the use of a more practice-based lens from a theoretical perspective, Ybema et al. (2016, p. 21) claim that empirical work on resistance to change still tends to “perpetuate essentialist notions” of change agent and resister identities.

Furthermore, although most research on resistance to change perceives resistance as dysfunctional, irrational, and antagonistic, some studies suggest that resistance can potentially be useful (Ford et al., 2008; Ford & Ford, 2010; Thomas et al., 2011). From this perspective, resistance might serve as a resource for new ideas and might give valuable information about the proposed change. Resistance can thus be productive (Courpasson et al., 2012; Lansu, 2019; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2018). To uncover how resistance might offer potential openings for change, we need to look at how resistance is practiced instead of the motivations behind it.

Consequently, studying the responses to the gender intervention in our case, we do not consider the actors involved as pure resisters. We move beyond the fixed identities of resister versus change agent, and conceptualize resistance as a complex, nuanced, situated, and contradictory practice. Specifically, we focus on discursive practices of resistance. We see these discursive resistance practices as the practices of discourse, “linked to the symbolic, political and material in a particular social and historical context” (Powell et al., 2018, p. 133). Analyzing resistance as discursive practices allows us to unpack the nuances, ambiguities, and contradictions within resistance, and explore how these practices might contribute to change. In our analysis, we specifically examine how marines draw on a discourse of the hegemonic military masculinity of the combat soldier. Hegemonic masculinity, as per Connell (2005), can be used as a defense mechanism to maintain the current gender regime, and in this case to resist the introduction of women in the Dutch Marine Corps. However, the nuances and contradictions in these discursive resistance practices also offer potential for change (Wetherell & Edley, 2014). Similarly to what Butler (1990) suggests, gender is continuously repeated in these resistance practices and each repetition is slightly different. These rearticulations can undermine or subvert the hegemonic character of dominant gender norms. When discursive resistance practices defend hegemonic military masculinity, the repetitions can contribute to changing exactly what is meant to be defended.
2.3 | Discourse of hegemonic military masculinity in resistance practices

Hegemonic masculinity refers to the most exalted form of being a man in society (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005); it exists for society as a whole, but can also be specific for an institution. Because the military has such a distinctively gendered culture and because gender is central in this intervention, gender is at the forefront of the resistance practices we observed. We focus on a specific construction of gender, namely military masculinity. As with masculinity in general, military masculinity is not a homogenous or monolithic construct (Henry, 2017): it is multidimensional and dynamic (Kachtan, 2019), complex, and inconsistent (Hinojosa, 2010).

This multiplicity of military masculinities results in a hierarchy of hegemonic and subordinate forms (Barrett, 1996; Cockburn & Enloe, 2012; Cohn, 1999; Hinojosa, 2010). Certain occupations within the military are automatically seen as related to a more subordinate form of masculinity, especially those associated with “feminized” tasks, such as nurses and administrative support roles (Higate, 2003). As combat is seen as the most masculine space (Crowley & Sandhoff, 2017), the combat soldier is generally perceived as embodying the most hegemonic form of military masculinity (Kachtan, 2019; Swain, 2016). Authors note how characteristics of hegemonic military masculinity are closely related to combat: physical strength and fitness, aggression, self-discipline, and emotional control (Duncanson, 2015; Hinojosa, 2010; Perez & Sasson-Levy, 2015). Furthermore, homosociality, or the comradeship between male soldiers, is seen as pivotal in the construction of hegemonic military masculinity (Bird, 1996; Hockey, 2003; Kaplan & Ben-Ari, 2000). As we will show in our analysis, marines draw on these characteristics of hegemonic military masculinity to resist the introduction of women in the Marine Corps.

Although we can point to hegemonic and more subordinate forms of military masculinity, the hierarchy of military masculinities is not static but dynamic and conflict ridden. As Hinojosa (2010, p. 179) states, soldiers “create hierarchies that subordinate others while simultaneously placing their own perceived characteristics in positions of symbolic dominance.” These hierarchies are constructed based on people’s age, race, gender, rank, military branch, and occupation (Duncanson, 2009). Barrett (1996), for example, shows how military men in various occupations try to construct a dominant form of military masculinity by drawing on characteristics they consider part of their job specialty, such as technical rationality or taking risk in the face of danger.

Despite the emphasis by Connell (2005) that hegemonic masculinity embodies only a currently accepted defense of gender inequality and is thus always contestable, the hegemonic masculinity of combat soldiers has predominantly been perceived as homogenous and unchanging (Duncanson, 2015; Kachtan & Wasserman, 2015). However, a few recent studies have suggested that changes in the image of the combat soldier might be possible. Kachtan (2019), and Kachtan and Wasserman (2015) study two rivaling infantry brigades in the Israeli military. They indicate that the masculinity of the combat soldier might not be uniform, as both infantry brigades construct their own, competing, contradictory combat masculinities. Furthermore, Wasserman et al. (2018) show that hegemonic military masculinity may be changed. Studying pilots in the Israeli Air Force, the authors demonstrate how these soldiers transform their masculine identity. Instead of resisting change toward “feminine” values that are introduced in their workplace and that might otherwise threaten the pilots’ masculinity, they appropriate these values and use them to transform their masculine identity. Although this case study shows the possibility for change in hegemonic masculinity, Wasserman et al. (2018) caution against optimism. They argue that including feminine traits into their masculinity seems only reserved for men in hegemonic positions. Overall, the question remains whether a change in hegemonic (military) masculinity leads to change toward gender equality.

This paper brings together different strands of literature to unpack resistance and help gender interventions in the military move forward. The literature on resistance to women in the military introduces us to the frequently used arguments against the introduction of women. To complicate this resistance, we turn to CMS literature on resistance through which we conceptualize resistance as a practice. Combining this with literature on (hegemonic) military masculinity allows us to show how marines rearticulate a discourse of hegemonic military masculinity in their resistance practices. It is precisely these rearticulations that delegitimize the discourse on hegemonic military masculinity and can contribute to change.
CASE AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 The Royal Netherlands Marine Corps

This paper is based on a qualitative case study of the Dutch Marine Corps. Using a case study design allows us to delve into the complexity and particular nature of this case. Because the occupation of soldiering is historically linked to men and masculinity (Sasson-Levy, 2011b; Winslow, 1997), the military can be seen as an extreme case when it comes to gender equality interventions. Extreme cases generally contain more information than average cases (Martí & Fernández, 2013), and the extremity of this case makes for overt resistance practices. At the same time, the gender change intervention discussed in this paper, the official opening up of the occupation for women, is specific and minimal. This gives us the opportunity to zoom in on only the resistance practices related to this particular change intervention (Bergqvist et al., 2013).

The Dutch Marine Corps is an elite military unit specifically trained for combat missions. The Marine Corps uses strict selection criteria to decide who gets into basic training; most people who are interested fail the physical, medical, and psychological entry tests. Ever since its founding in 1665, the Corps had only allowed men to apply. In 2015, a member of parliament put forth a motion requesting the government to open up the Marine Corps for women. She argued that a modern military should not have occupational segregation by gender and that the other Dutch elite combat unit had allowed women to apply since 2013. While this motion was never put up for a vote, it did serve as catalyst for the Minister for Defense to announce, in May 2016, that she would open up the Marine Corps for women on January 1, 2017. There was hardly any structural organizational preparation in the meantime; although a taskforce was installed to discuss the practical implications of the decision, its starting point was that nothing should be changed in the requirements of the Corps. The taskforce concluded that the introduction of women would be complicated, but offered no solutions. Despite the opening of the Corps in 2017, the Dutch military currently has no female marines.

3.2 Data collection

The military being a hierarchical and inaccessible organization, gaining full access to the Marine Corps was difficult. Consequently, interviewees were selected by our contact person within the organization. The contact person was aware of our research interest regarding the planned integration of women in the organization, but we asked him to not take into account marines’ interest or opinion regarding this topic when selecting the interviewees. Our only requirement was that we wanted to speak with personnel in various ranks. While we do not claim that our sample is representative for the Marine Corps, it is pertinent to mention that resistance practices were present in the vast majority of the interviews.

Data collection started in March 2017, 2 months after the official opening of the Corps for women. We specifically decided to collect the data as soon as possible after the opening, as during this time the topic was most on the employees’ mind. The first author conducted 23 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Marine Corps personnel of various ranks, Navy personnel working in support roles for the Marine Corps, and a Ministry for Defense Diversity Officer. A complete overview of interviewees can be found in Table 1. All interviews took place at one of the Marine Corps’ bases. Interviews lasted between 30 min and an hour and a half, and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Topics discussed included motivation for joining the military, what interviewees (dis)liked about their job, their image of a “real” marine, and their opinion on and possible (dis)advantages to the introduction of women. In addition to the interviews, the first author conducted field observations while visiting the Marine Corps bases for interviews, and had informal conversations with the commanders of the two main Marine Corps bases and several other marines. Notes of these observations and conversations are included in the data. All names used in this study are fictitious to...
protect interviewees’ anonymity. The names have been chosen to preserve the distinctive “Dutchness” of interviewees’ last names as this gives us a clue about the diversity of the organization.

### 3.3 Data analysis

The interview and observational data allowed us to examine resistance to the introduction of women in the Marine Corps. We view marines’ responses as discursive resistance practices, meaning that these practices are how interviewees practice discourse (Powell et al., 2018). The first phase of analysis started with repeated reading of the materials and open coding, which yielded a wide array of topics marines considered relevant regarding the introduction of women. These ranged from occupational pride to women being emotional, and from sexual tensions to protecting women. Analyzing the codes revealed that these referred to the same themes that are often present when resisting women in combat roles: physical strength, mental strength, disruption of the social bond, and the status of the occupation. As not all references to these themes could be classified as resistance, the following round of analysis identified the discursive resistance practices in relation to the four themes. Subsequently, we moved on to a more focused analysis as we specifically looked for nuances, contradictions, and ambiguities within the resistance practices. While
the initial coding was carried out by the first author, the subsequent analysis of the discursive resistance practices was done by all authors together in recurring conversations about the data and what it revealed.

Regarding the first author’s position as researcher in the Marine Corps, being a young, white, female researcher in a men-only organization has no doubt influenced the constructed knowledge. While the authors do not feel that the interviewees have been dishonest, or withheld any information on purpose, it is highly likely that they would have behaved and responded differently had the interviewer been a man (Williams & Heikes, 1993). Yet, as Lomsky-Feder and Rapoport (2003) argue, being a female researcher in a male organization can be an asset. Being interviewed by a woman, who was not related to the Dutch military in any way, encouraged interviewees to give more detailed descriptions about their profession to introduce us to their world, and to explain their taken-for-granted assumptions. The interviewer’s outsider position as a “harmless female student,” who was not connected to the Corps in any way, also resulted in interviewees being open about certain sensitive topics, such as unofficial hazing rituals. Furthermore, because the interviewer was a woman within the age range to apply for the Marine Corps, interviewees occasionally asked her whether she wanted to become a marine herself. Some interviewees used the interviewer as an example for why they thought the introduction of women in the Corps would not work, and they regularly invoked a candid discourse of hegemonic masculinity when doing so.

4 | DISCURSIVE RESISTANCE PRACTICES: SHIFTS IN HEGEMONIC MILITARY MASCULINITY

The following section studies marines’ discursive resistance practices. Untangling their resistance practices, we find that marines draw on a discourse of hegemonic military masculinity. They emphasize essentialist gender differences and refer to characteristics of hegemonic military masculinity to substantiate their resistance against women in the Marine Corps. Yet, their resistance is not straightforward, there are nuances, ambiguities, and contradictions in the way they discuss the introduction of women. Because the four commonly used reasons for the resistance against women in combat roles emerged from our findings as well, we have divided the practices in line with these themes.

4.1 | Women are too weak for combat

First, marines drew on the discourse of women being unsuited because they are too weak for this occupation. They highlighted superior physical strength as essential for their occupation, a characteristic often seen as key in the construction of hegemonic military masculinity. Although inherent physical differences between men and women were frequently emphasized in their discursive resistance practices, we also found more nuanced responses. For instance, when discussing whether women belong in combat positions, Marine Schipper said:

They are of course physically less strong. And if they could really... they must be able to do the same as the man, I believe. And if they can’t, then I think that will hold the entire group back. It is, of course, a millstone around your neck if someone doesn’t make it. But that is, man or woman, it’s a burden in both cases. But with a woman, of course, the odds of it happening are a bit higher. Or she must... And that’s why they should of course keep basic training exactly the same. Because, of course, if she simply passes basic training and afterward she physically keeps up... Yeah, why not?

Schipper invokes a discourse of essentialist gender differences by claiming that women are physically weaker than men. He creates a natural difference between the two sexes and claims that the odds of a female marine keeping the rest of a unit back are higher. Yet this resistance practice also shows nuances, as Schipper argues that if a woman passes the same physical tests as men do, she should be accepted. Passing military training is seen as a rite
de passage for new recruits, after which they are accepted into the organization (Do & Samuels, 2021; Hockey, 2003; Winslow, 1999). However, this rite the passage might not be as simple for women. Even if women do pass the same physical tests as men, male soldiers tend to think that these women were allowed to pass unfairly (Cohn, 2000; Sasson-Levy & Amram-Katz, 2007). As a result, women are still not accepted as full members. We might see Schippers insistence that women should be accepted if they pass the same tests as men as a deviation from previous research, but is it difficult to know if his reaction would be the same if women do make it into the Marine Corps. Furthermore, his insistence on not changing the requirements of basic training implicitly creates differences between two types of women: women who are suited for the Marine Corps—those who can do the exact same things as male marines—and women who are not suited. This division between qualified and unqualified women was echoed in many interviews. Marine Martens, for example, created a distinction between "extremely tough" women, who would be accepted as marines, and "timid girls" who would not fit in the organization.

Another interesting facet of this excerpt is the liberal use of the phrase "of course." Schipper first uses the phrase to emphasize the essentialist difference he creates between men and women. However, he also uses the phrase when he argues that "of course" if women pass the same tests they should be accepted. This makes the acceptance of certain women seem as natural as the biological differences he emphasized earlier, which undermines his appeal to essentialist gender differences. Additionally, by stating that it also is a burden if a man cannot keep up, Schipper allows for the possibility of a male marine being not strong enough. In doing so, he suggests an opening in the hegemonic military masculinity of combat soldiers, as having the strength for combat is no longer only reserved for men, and is not reserved for all men.

Contrary to the previous practice in which basic training was seen as the proper criterion to assess suitability for both men and women, the predictive validity of military training is questioned by Marine van Dongen:

A mountain- or winter training, sure, guys from the gym would be able to make it through those. And you as well, if you would train for it. Do you know what I mean? That’s not something only marines are capable of. But it’s also afterward that you need to be able to continue. Look, it’s, it’s only four weeks in the mountains, or only four weeks in the snow, or only a couple of weeks in the jungle. Afterward: there you go, here’s your medal, put it on your uniform, now you are one of us. But you must be able to persevere and keep up with all of it afterward as well. Look, and anyone can shoot, you know, you don’t have to study for that, or something. But it’s, it’s too deeply ingrained that it, that they must remain men.

Van Dongen argues that almost anyone can make it through the training. He disregards the importance of the strength of combat soldiers and argues that activities that are strongly related to hegemonic military masculinity, such as shooting, are not limited to (certain types of) men. In doing so, he undermines essentialist gender differences regarding physical strength by claiming that both women and men are capable of getting fit enough for basic training. Instead, he invokes the norm of perseverance and claims this to be the ultimate test for marines. Consequently, he attempts to change the discourse on hegemonic military masculinity. It is not about whether you pass a certain training, but it is about whether you can persevere during your entire career. This suggests that once certain markers of hegemonic military masculinity are perceived as achievable for women, new criteria are formulated (Pendlebury, 2020). Interestingly enough, by defining perseverance as being able to keep up after basic training, Van Dongen creates an unattainable ideal—as, by definition, this cannot be tested in training. Proving perseverance is not only unachievable for women, it is also unreachable for men.

Our analysis demonstrates marines emphasizing inherent differences between men and women when it comes to physical strength as a ground for the exclusion of women. Doing so implicitly invokes a discourse of hegemonic military masculinity, in which physical strength is a key characteristic. However, marines nuance these statements by claiming both that some women are as capable or as strong as men, and that some men are not strong enough to make it. This suggests that through training an exceptional woman might be able to overcome the claimed differences
between men and women. Other resistance practices abandoned the discourse on essentialist gender differences in response to the introduction of women, claiming that other norms are more important when it comes to proving your suitability as marine.

### 4.2 Women are mentally unsuited

Second, marines drew on the discourse of women being unsuited because they are mentally incapable of holding combat positions. However, we also find more nuanced practices that, despite the claimed gender differences, state that certain women might be suitable for the Marine Corps. This was visible in officer Feenstra's response to the question whether he felt women belong in combat positions:

> Well, if a woman specifically choses it [a combat position] then she'll no doubt fit in. But whether they belong? I don't know if the female instinct is built for that. That's how a woman is made. Yeah, can you imagine yourself being in it [the Marine Corps]?! 

Feenstra starts by stating that the rare woman who chooses a combat position will fit in, thereby seemingly negating the norm of combat being a male space. Yet he contradicts this by questioning if the female instinct is right for combat, a claim that is often brought up in studies on resistance against women in combat (Goldstein, 2018; Sasson-Levy, 2003). He reconstructs essentialist distinctions between men and women by implying that women lack the necessary warrior ethic to become a combat soldier. Through this claim, he also reinforces characteristics regarding mental strength and emotional control that are often central in the discourse on hegemonic military masculinity. However, the nuances in his resistance practice call into question the importance of this particular characteristic. Feenstra claims that women can fit in, implying that they should be able to carry out the necessary tasks, despite the female instinct not being made for combat. By making this claim, he delegitimizes this instinct as a characteristic on which one can be judged to be suited for the Marine Corps. Finally, Feenstra distinguishes between fitting in and belonging in combat positions. He shows that he does believe that certain women are able to become marines, stating that those who choose to do so will fit in. Yet by making the distinction with belonging, he simultaneously argues that women as a group, or as a category, will never belong to the Marine Corps.

Marine De Graaf also stated that some, but not all, women could be mentally suited for the Marine Corps. At some point during the interview, he brought up one of his colleagues, a woman working for the Navy in a support role. He argued that she behaved in a way that did not fit military norms. Probing further, the interviewer asked if this behavior was typical for this one colleague. De Graaf said:

> Well that’s feminine, to enjoy kicking up a dust. Yes, that’s feminine. At least with, not just in relationships but more in general, also in the workplace. Women do that more, enjoy doing that. Yeah, with us, that’s not possible at all. That’s just not done. And yeah... But once a woman makes it [through basic training], then I have the idea that she will fit in more. So then I don’t think that she would be that way.

Similar to other resistance practices, this practice creates a distinction between women who are suited for the Corps and those who are not. De Graaf emphasizes the difference between what he sees as feminine behavior and the kind of behavior he considers appropriate for marines. Despite this, he does believe that certain women would fit in with the organization and would act in line with marines’ behavioral norms. This is because during basic training recruits are taught these norms, meaning that everybody who makes it through will behave accordingly. As mentioned above, basic training is generally seen as rite de passage, which changes civilians into soldiers (Do & Samuels, 2021; Winslow, 1999). Yet by claiming that basic training can change women enough to fit in with the Marine Corps, De
Graaf calls into question whether these essentialist gender differences are truly essentialist. If these characteristics can be taught in basic training then they are not inherently masculine or feminine.

Similar to the resistance practices centered on physical strength, our analysis shows marines emphasizing essentialist gender differences regarding the mental suitability of women. They highlight the importance of mental strength, a central characteristic in the discourse on hegemonic military masculinity. However, nuances in their resistance practices show that a distinction is made between those women who are mentally suitable and women in general. Only women who adhere to the hegemonic masculine norms of the organization, or women who can be taught to behave in the right manner, are deemed suited for the organization. Women must thus abide by the norms on mental strength to be able to fit into the Marine Corps. Yet our analysis also shows that by engaging in these discursive resistance practices, marines delegitimize the essentialist gender differences on which their resistance is based.

4.3 | Women's presence is socially disruptive

Third, the resistance practices centered on the idea that the presence of women would disrupt the social cohesion in the organization. The bond between male soldiers is seen as a central component of hegemonic military masculinity and interviewees often emphasized the unique bond between male soldiers as an essential element of their organization. When discussing the bond between marines and how this would possibly be affected by the integration of women, Marine Jonker said:

> Look, we’re all thinking about, you know, what it would be like for the woman to join the Corps, with only men, and all of that. But look, guys are also... if they are here and there’s a woman present all the time then it could result in tensions. And it is not intended that way, but it could happen. But yeah, I don’t know how it will turn out. And that, you know. It also depends on the person, of course, who... If the woman comes with and she’s one of the guys, then there’s no problem. It really depends on the person. But yeah, it’s the same with a man. I also had guys in basic training who I didn’t get along with, or whatever. You’ll always have that with someone. Or that it just doesn’t click. But you have to get the job done, and if you both act professionally and eh... Yeah, we need to collaborate. We will have to make the best out of it. Yeah, that should be possible with a woman as well. But it depends on your attitude.

Jonker draws on notions of hegemonic military masculinity by arguing that the presence of women disrupts the homosocial bond between men and could lead to tensions. In the military, group cohesion is seen as one of the core facets of operational effectiveness, and the organization is inclined to believe that persons of the same sex bond with each other more easily (Basham, 2009). One of the reasons for this is that women are often thought to "by their presence" distract men (Iskra, 2007, p. 215), implying that the presence of women will cause men to compete with each other for a sexual relation with these women. Research shows (Herbert, 1998; Steidl & Brookshire, 2019) that in response, female soldiers start behaving more masculine to fit in with the group. In line with this, Jonker claims that whether tensions arise also depends on the behavior of the person involved: a woman’s presence is not problematic if she is "one of the guys," thus if she behaves more masculine. However, he contradicts the literature on the homosocial bond between men by stating that there are men in the Marine Corps he does not get along with. This undermines the military image of social cohesion centered on being similar. His focus on getting the job done, furthermore, shows a potential shift in norms in which professionalism can be used as a source of unity. He emphasizes that acting professionally and collaborating should be possible for both men and women, which further delegitimizes the importance of social cohesion based on similarity.

Highlighting how the presence of women may disrupt the bond between men also reinforces a heteronormative discourse within the organization. This is explicated by the following quote by marine Becht:
I believe that things will change. You can't... First, the whole social bond will be disrupted by having someone of a different sex present. So that changes the whole situation of men among themselves. That doesn't have to be... It will have negative consequences, but it doesn't have to be an obstacle. It doesn't have to be a reason why it can't happen. But that will change. It will, it will be more difficult to get changed out in the field, for example. Or to be naked somewhere – because that happens – with women around. That's something you should take into account. But, yeah, marines aren't averse to doing or showing each other crazy stuff.... And, and it, it is difficult to fit women in with that. It's not the most important thing, of course, but these are some of the small things you will encounter.

In describing what would change when women are accepted, Becht focuses mainly on more practical issues. Mentioning these practical issues and the social bond at the same time begs the question of whether these are moments in which a social bond between men is created. Becht talks of marines "doing or showing each other crazy stuff" and that fitting in a woman is difficult during these activities. Mentioning being naked and doing crazy stuff hints to the homosocial or even homoerotic activities that many authors have related to the social bond between men in the military (e.g., Higate, 2012; Wadham, 2013). Many authors have argued that the construction of hegemonic military masculinity requires an intensification of heterosexuality (Hockey, 2003; Woodward, 2003). Marines' close bond appears to rely on the assumption that there are no homosexual men in their organization. Being naked with a woman is thus seen as sexual, while being naked with a man is not. However, while Becht brings up these activities to argue that this might be difficult when it comes to the introduction of women, he also downplays the importance of these moments. It thus seems as if he himself also realizes that the possible disruption of the social bond between men is not as strong an argument against the introduction of women.

Our analysis demonstrates marines drawing on a discourse of hegemonic military masculinity regarding women's presence as socially disruptive, reinforcing the idea that cohesion within the Corps is based on social relations between men. This is based on stereotypes regarding the role women are supposed to play in relation to men: an inherently sexual role. Nuances in the resistance practices showed that if women would behave in a more masculine way, their presence might have less of an effect on men's social bond. While this offers an opening for certain women, it does not fundamentally alter the importance of the masculine image of men among themselves. However, the focus on behaving professionally and arguing that not everybody gets along, do challenge this masculine ideal. It highlights professionalism as more important than the social bond between marines. Furthermore, arguing that male marines also sometimes do not get along disputes the myth of the unique bond among men.

4.4 | Women's introduction is a threat to the status of the profession

Lastly, marines' resistance practices revolved around the loss of status when women would enter the profession. These resistance practices most clearly draw on hegemonic military masculinity, as marines argue that allowing women into their occupation makes it no longer the most exalted, and thus hegemonic, form of being a (military) man. However, our analysis also shows practices in which this sentiment is nuanced. This comes to the fore in the following quote by officer Van Oudewater:

Look, at the start we were kind of cynical, you know. Alright, female marines, alright, okay. But it's forced on us. Like, people say, we'd prefer for it to be a men's organization. But it's forced on us by the Minister, anyway. Well, it trickles down and the general says: "Yeah, we have to do it, so we'll do it. And nothing will be changed in the requirements". So, okay, well, then everybody is happy, if nothing will be changed. "Okay, let them come". So...

I: But people would prefer it to be a men's organization?
Of course it's badass to say, "hey, we are the sole men-only unit". Yes. England is already on board [regarding women], marines. With the American marines there have been women for years. And the Commando Corps [the other Dutch elite combat unit] also has to accept women. So yeah, it definitely, it would be badass if [you can say], "no, see, no woman has made it yet, and we'd rather not do it". Yeah, I think that's outdated. Let them show it, if they really want to they should meet the requirements.

Van Oudewater compares the Dutch Marine Corps to the British and American marines, and to another Dutch elite combat unit, considering it a masculine status symbol that they do allow women whereas the Dutch Marine Corps did not. He draws on hegemonic military masculinity by considering it "of course badass" to not have women, suggesting that this means his unit's bar is higher, and consequently winning an implicit competition vis-à-vis hegemonic military masculinity (Barrett, 1996; Duncanson, 2009; Hinojosa, 2010). However, Van Oudewater also mentions that he thinks it is outdated for women not to be allowed in the Corps, indicating that he might no longer find this an acceptable way of proving one's hegemonic military masculinity. This might seem a signal that norms on gender equality are changing within the organization. Yet while he claims that women should be accepted if they meet the requirements, the way he phrases this—"let them show it"—does not give the impression that he believes that women "really want" it or can make it. Furthermore, he insists that the requirements should not be changed. This sentiment was echoed in many interviews and through it marines resisted the notion that a change in the requirements might be relevant or necessary. Several authors (Duncanson, 2009; Sion, 2006) have indicated that although the nature of warfare has changed drastically over the years, the hegemonic masculine image of the combat soldier has remained stable. The emphasis on not changing the requirements suggests that it is similarly not up for discussion whether the current image of a marine still fits this era of peacekeeping missions.

Marine Martens also indicated the importance of the Marine Corps being men-only for the status of the profession:

I think that marines all have this idea of "yeah, we're the shit" of course. And if all of a sudden they say, yes, women can be accepted too, then it's like: "women can be accepted too?!” I think that it changes a marine's self-image, as well. Like, in the sense of... And there are a lot of people, me included, who will have to get used to it, first of all. And yeah, we will have to accept it, one way or another. But anyway, the Commando Corps [the other elite combat unit] has also been opened up for women, women can apply there. But there has never been a woman who has made it. So yeah, let's wait and see who will manage to pass Marine Corps' basic training.

Martens emphasizes the masculine norm of the Marine Corps by arguing that the introduction of women will transform a marine's self-image. In this resistance practice, the status of being a marine is clearly linked to masculinity, which is impacted by the introduction of women (Goldstein, 2018; Sasson-Levy & Amram-Katz, 2007). Martens does nuance this resistance by arguing that this is something people will have to accept. Although this does not decrease the importance of the hegemonic masculine norm, it does offer potential for change as he perceives acceptance as feasible. However, he also leaves room for the possibility that acceptance is not necessary. Referencing the other elite combat unit in the Dutch military, where no woman has made it through basic training yet, he suggests that maybe no woman will succeed in becoming a marine. In doing so, he draws on a discourse related to the unsuitability of women, thereby reinforcing masculine norms.

Our analysis shows marines drawing on a discourse of hegemonic military masculinity by claiming that a men-only organization inherently grants a certain status. Resistance practices showed marines claiming the profession as uniquely masculine. Their resistance practices demonstrate a competition with other elite combat units in the Dutch military, specifically regarding the introduction of women and whether women have made it into these units. This shows that the introduction of women in the Marine Corps may have created a struggle between the different elite combat units of the Dutch military vis-à-vis hegemonic military masculinity. For a while, marines could claim
“victory” in this struggle because they were the last men-only combat unit. The introduction of women in the Corps consequently means that marines can no longer use this to claim that they are the most masculine unit. Yet the practices also indicate a willingness to accept this change in status once women have made it through basic training and have become a part of the organization.

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper aims to advance the discussion on gender equality interventions by exploring discursive resistance practices in response to a specific intervention in the military. It brings together three strands of literature: on gender interventions, on organizational resistance, and on hegemonic military masculinity. Our analysis shows how resistance against an intervention can be more than an oppositional force (McCabe et al., 2020) or an explanation for the slow pace of change (Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014). While other authors have also taken a more positive outlook toward resistance (Ford et al., 2008; Ford & Ford, 2010; Thomas et al., 2011; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2018), they have mostly argued that resistance can be made productive for change—for example by using resistance as a source of information. This paper highlights how resistance against a gender intervention needs to be taken more seriously, as the discursive resistance practices themselves contribute to discursive organizational change. Unpacking resistance as discursive practices, we examined nuances, ambiguities, and contradictions in how marines resisted the introduction of women, that would otherwise have been overlooked (Ybema et al., 2016). The study thus showcases the benefits of examining how resistance is practiced, instead of locking organizational members in a fixed position vis-à-vis change. We argue that resistance contributes to change, because the intervention compels organizational members to explicate and contemplate their gender beliefs. Having to explicate gender beliefs takes away from the self-evidence of essentialist gender differences and hegemonic military masculinity, and destabilizes organizational norms and beliefs based in gender inequality.

First, our findings show that the introduction of women spurs marines to invoke essentialist gender differences. On the surface, their resistance practices seem to only defend the current gender regime of the organization. However, our fine-grained analysis shows that in explaining their resistance, marines start to shift in their positions. As suggested by Wetherell and Edley (2014), social change can come about through these shifts and inconsistencies. While interviewees often initially relied on statements rooted in gender essentialist beliefs, they quickly nuanced and contradicted them. Women as a group were considered too weak for the Marine Corps, but marines simultaneously argued that certain, exceptional women could be accepted as marine. Despite highlighting their belief in the existence of inherent biological differences between men and women, they also note that these differences could be overcome through military training. Our analysis of their resistance practices shows that marines begin to realize that it is no longer socially acceptable to argue that women should be barred from their organization altogether. We thus see a tentative movement toward the acceptance of those women who can prove themselves worthy. While this hesitant acceptance of extraordinary women is embedded in the belief that women as a group remain the weaker sex and do not belong in the Marine Corps, their claims that some women can become marines do show cracks in gender essentialism. However, these cracks are only partial. The masculine image of the combat soldier may be challenged by the acceptance of certain women, but the acceptance of those women still hinges on their adherence to the organization’s masculine standards. This is demonstrated by interviewees insisting that the occupational requirements remain the same and emphasizing that women should behave in a more masculine way to fit in. Consequently, we argue that the norm of the Marine Corps as a masculine space (Crowley & Sandhoff, 2017; Goldstein, 2018) is both challenged and reinforced by the acceptance of exceptional women. The discussion of the gender intervention in our case was mostly theoretical, as there were no women who had yet applied to become a marine. Our findings show that the theoretical discussion of a gender intervention can be sufficient to compel organizational members to contemplate their gender beliefs. Humbert et al. (2019) have shown that holding these kinds of beliefs lowers the support for
gender interventions. However, our study shows that resistance to a gender intervention can also spur organizational members into nuancing and contradicting their own gender beliefs, thereby contributing to organizational change.

Second, our findings point to shifts in the discourse of hegemonic military masculinity. Unlike the assertion by Connell (2005) that hegemonic masculinity is contestable, much of the literature tends to see hegemonic military masculinity as unchanging (Duncanson, 2015; Kachtan & Wasserman, 2015). We side with Connell by showing how resistance to a gender intervention in the military contributes to cracks in the organizational discourse on hegemonic military masculinity. In line with Butler (1990), our findings show how the norms that underpin the discourse of hegemonic military masculinity—physical strength, mental strength, social cohesion, and masculine status—are rearticulated and thereby undermined. The discursive resistance centers on hegemonic military masculinity, but—as Butler suggests—the repetitions are never perfect nor stable. Consequently, repeating the discourse of hegemonic military masculinity means rearticulating the discourse, which undermines or subverts the dominant norms. This takes away the self-evident, hegemonic character of military masculinity. By stating that male marines cannot always keep up, it is implied that not all male marines are physically and mentally strong enough for the required tasks at all times. This undermines combat soldiers’ claim to superior strength. Similarly, explaining that not all male marines get along indicates cracks in the social cohesion, which defies the norm of the special bond between men. Furthermore, resistance practices question the significance of these norms. Marines highlighted the importance of social cohesion and the status related to the Marine Corps being a men-only organization, and simultaneously discussed these norms as outdated. Another shift in hegemonic military masculinity comes with the suggestion that new norms are possible, such as professionalism as a replacement for the importance of the bond between men. Importantly, this indicates an opening for a norm that is not rooted in military masculinity. We argue that the resistance practices take away from the self-evident nature of the organizational discourse of hegemonic military masculinity by contemplating its underlying norms. Through their resistance practices, marines undermine the discourse on hegemonic military masculinity, thereby contributing to organizational change.

Unpacking resistance and zooming in on the nuances and contradictions in resistance practices consequently show us how resistance practices against gender interventions entail critique on gendered norms. Various studies have argued that gender equality interventions need to tackle gendered organizational norms to be successful (Christensen et al., 2020; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Eriksson-Zettersquist & Renemark, 2016). One of the goals of organizational change toward gender equality is thus to change these organizational norms and to create new norms that are not based in inequality. Moving beyond resistance as a negative to overcome therefore allows us to see how gendered norms are challenged by organizational members’ resistance practices.

The implications of this study for future theorizing on resistance to gender interventions are that research should take resistance more seriously. Instead of trying to avoid resistance (Powell et al., 2018), we need to unpack what kind of change resistance is already putting into motion. Overall, our study shows that resistance practices to a gender intervention may contribute to organizational change by transforming essentialist gender beliefs and the discourse on hegemonic military masculinity.

Our insights also have implications for gender interventions in the military specifically. Although the nature of warfare has changed and the number of peacekeeping missions has increased (Duncanson, 2009; Sion, 2006), we do not observe openings for a discussion on changes in the role of the military or the image of the combat soldier. The resistance practices show subtle openings that contribute to change in organizational norms and gender beliefs, but they do not indicate a willingness to accept more fundamental organizational change toward gender equality. We argue that future gender interventions in combat units should include reflections on the role these units have to play in the contemporary military. Highlighting the importance of peacekeeping missions offers the opportunity to value other, more “feminine,” competences (Duncanson, 2015). As a result, the existing organizational requirements and work practices might be challenged. These reflections, combined with the knowledge gained by unpacking resistance practices, could lead to broader, more fundamental openings for gender change in the military.
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