



Gender Inequalities in the Military Service: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the literature regarding gender inequalities in the military service. In doing so, it discloses challenges and opportunities for women's integration and finds new avenues for future research. Recent scientific research has evidenced that women still represent a growing minority in most Western militaries. Women's integration deserves equal opportunities across all branches and levels of responsibility in the military, however, their expansion to ground combat roles is still a challenge to the military and policy-makers. Scholars have also reported about the decision to increase the number of women in combat roles, as it may potentiate adverse experiences, due to closer proximity to men in circumstances with little or no privacy. Conversely, scientific research has shown that more egalitarian women reported significantly less sexual harassment victimization. Furthermore, our insights suggest that it might be fruitful to integrate women in ground combat roles as special forces' operators, with a view to induce a reduction of marginalization and sexual harassment, by gaining respect in a male-dominant culture. The presented idea should be interpreted with caution and needs to be supported by empirical research; although we are convinced that future research will be revealing and might represent a game-changing situation to women inequalities in the armed forces.

Keywords Gender · Women · Inequalities · Military · Army · Systematic literature review · Special operations forces · Ground combat · Sexual harassment

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Introduction

Women in the military and their relationship with war are subjects that often provoke controversial reactions which reveal entrenched stereotypes and cultural values central to many societies (Carreiras 2006). The expansion of roles for women in the armed forces has evolved over decades. By law, in most Western countries women are not precluded from service in any military unit (Burrelli 2013). After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, in the wake of what has been called “a renaissance of ground combat in military operational thinking” the topic of women’s access to military positions and especially combat roles has (again) been moving up the agenda, reinvigorating a debate which has never faded (Carreiras and Kümmel 2008). According to the U.S. (United States) Department of Defence, as of February 2012, over 20,000 female members have served in Afghanistan and Iraq, over 283 thousand female members have been deployed, over 800 have been wounded and over 130 have died. On numerous occasions women have been recognized for their heroism, with two of them earning Silver Star medals (Burrelli 2013). Moreover, between 2003 and 2013, the U.S. Military deployed all-female counterinsurgent teams in Iraq and Afghanistan, thus in various forms those teams provided medical assistance and participated in highly combative special operations alongside Army Rangers and Green Berets in Afghanistan (Greenburg 2017). Motivated by the above, the U.S. Armed Forces are changing. An example of this change is illustrated by Greenburg (2017) as he argues that the U.S. military is in the process of opening ground combat positions to women. Until the combat exclusion policy was rescinded in 2013, women were technically banned from ground combat positions. It is worth noticing that Carreiras (2012) evidenced that inclusiveness is not a direct consequence of increasing numbers of women; it developed due to simultaneous organization and societal pressures. Therefore, the Western society and political decision makers have a preponderant role in the inclusion of women in the armed forces, leaving this responsibility aside from the exclusive sphere of the military leaders.

The inclusion of women, particularly in combat roles is still raising a series of questions and it is attracting considerable academic debate. Even in countries where women are not serving in direct combat job specialities, women’s combat support positions do expose them to combat situations (Weatherill et al. 2011). Moreover, managing diversity more than ensuring homogeneity is thus the central challenge for personnel policies in the armed forces (Carreiras 2012), which reiterates the importance of this theme.

We propose an in-depth analysis of the literature, in order to find the challenges and opportunities of women’s integration in the military service. The objective is to define guidelines for future research and to intensify the discussion among scholars; therefore, it is in this regard that our paper offers its greatest contribution. We have structured this paper in three sections, as follows: firstly, we describe the methodological process; secondly, we investigate the phenomenon of gender inequalities in a military context; and thirdly, we provide its implications and suggestions for future research.

Methodology

This paper follows a systematic review which offers a comprehensive methodology for assessing current knowledge using a multi-stage review strategy (Pittaway et al. 2004). According to Tranfield et al. (2003) systematic reviews represent rigorous scientific research of the literature and include three main stages: (1) a clear set of steps that can be replicated, (2) evidence that supports arguments which are closely related to the research question, and (3) generalizability of the results. While there is much criticism of the merits of systematic reviews (Torgerson 2003), where Eysenck (1995) criticizes the “mechanical” nature of the review process without considering the quality of data interpretation, it is undisputed that these systematic reviews have several advantages. Thus, systematic reviews are commonly considered one of the most promising qualitative strategies, presenting a rigorous syntheses of qualitative findings (Given 2008) and differ from traditional narrative reviews in that their methods are explicit and open to scrutiny (Torgerson 2003).

According to Saunders et al. (2009) a systematic review requires clear assessment criteria for selection of articles to review. Articles are assessed on the quality of research and findings, individual studies are synthesized using a clear framework and findings presented in a balanced, impartial and comprehensive manner. In light of the above, we have conducted a research in one of the most relevant scientific citation indexing services *Web of Science* (WoS), presented by the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI). The string research was focused on the keywords “Women” and “Army” and was completed with 1547 documents in November 12th, 2018. The Table 1 displays its methodological approach.

The review process was based on successive filters: (1) articles written in English for an accurate interpretation, and (2) the selected *documents* were restricted to indexed articles and conference proceedings to ensure credibility, excluding e.g. book review, meeting abstracts. From a wide span of documents, the exclusion criteria also selected the most adequate contributions to the theme—women studies and social issues.

The WoS returned 69 research papers, as the exclusion rate was higher than that from the initial search. Data analysis consisted of a bibliometric review that has been firmly established and is a method increasingly used when studying various aspects of Science (Ellegaard and Wallin 2015). This method is used for providing quantitative analysis, and this paper takes advantage of the graphs provided by the

Table 1 Methodological approach

	Web of science	Search: Women and Army
Search	Title–abstract–keywords	1547
Language	English	1434
Document types	Articles and conference proceedings	1225
Research areas	Women studies and social issues	69

WoS database. The WoS database presents an analysis of sixteen records or categories which are statistically the most sought after by the readers. These categories include “country/regions”, “publication years”, “research areas”, “source titles” and “authors’ record count”. The aforementioned five categories were selected to be analysed as these are frequently used by Academics who carried out recent systematic literature reviews (vide Reis et al. 2018; and Reis et al. 2019). And also due to the fact that it presents relevant results when compared with the other available categories; for instance, it would not make much sense to present the WoS “document type” as it only presented two types of documents (i.e. articles and proceedings) due to the exclusion criteria that was applied for quality reasons.

Content analysis is also used to interpret data, which is a widely used qualitative research technique (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). Therefore, we followed the model of qualitative content analysis of Hancock and Algozzine (2016) that generally: (1) identifies the research question, (2) determines the categories (sociological constructs), (3) established grounded categories, (4) determines objective criteria of selection, (5) sorts data into various categories, (6) counts the number of entries in each category and seeks patterns, (7) considers the patterns in light of relevant literature or theory. To avoid a time-consuming process, we used a software program designed for computer-assisted qualitative data analysis—NVIVO, which allowed us to handle a considerable volume of data.

This research is limited due to the methodological design. In other words, this article is limited due to the nature of the database as the WoS citation index is constantly being updated with new literature. Therefore, the data collected represents a “snapshot” of a period of time (Coombes and Nicholson 2013). Although some conclusions can be drawn for the armed forces, we chose the keyword “army” rather than “armed forces” to delimit the field of study. In general terms, we have tried to be careful with the generalization perspective, as this research is exploratory due to the scarcity of studies using the systematic review method in the military context. In addition, the keyword search can also influence the results, such as “female” or “servicewomen” instead of “women”. However, the latter was the one with more hits and so we find it reasonable to argue that the analysed articles have a good chance to represent the main research efforts.

Findings

The first articles from WoS on gender are from Ferber and Lowry (1976), which noted the evident women’s high level of unemployment rate in the U.S. after World War II when compared with men’s; thus, it was not surprising to find growing interest on female unemployment at that time. A few years afterwards, Gottlieb (1978) conducted a study in order to try to understand the enlisting reasons of men and women in the U.S. Army. According to The female respondents in his study, they did not enlist in the Army because they were unable to find employment or because of intense social or personal problems as men stated. For women the Army represented a unique opportunity to test out their career alternatives as well as an opportunity to test out their independence. Later on, Savell et al. (1979) presented an article that

discussed the expansion of women's role in the U.S. Army. In this article, they try to understand the extent of soldier beliefs that certain military jobs are "appropriate" for women; the results expressed a favourable attitude towards the idea of employing women for traditionally male jobs in the U.S. These were the first research's registered by WoS' database which supports the introductory framework on the gender subject. Recent research indicates that veteran women continue to suffer from higher unemployment rates, when compared to men, and many existing policies/programs to assist veterans with civilian employment activities directed towards men (Greer 2017). Figure 1 illustrates the countries that publish the most on gender issues in the military.

As it can be observed in Fig. 1, the U.S. stands out with 38 published articles, against England, with 9 articles, whilst Israel presents 8 articles. The vast majority of the existing research has been conducted by military sociologists from countries where combat experience is common, such as the U.S. and Israel (Alvinus et al. 2018).

In the 80s, Woelfel's (1981) article addressed the increase integration of women in the U.S. Army, and realized that research at that time focused on: (1) attitudes towards the integration of women in the Army, (2) the impact of the role of women has had on the Army's ability to perform its mission, and (3) the adjustment of women in the Army.

Nowadays, women still represent a minority, though numbers are increasing rapidly in the U.S. military, and keep facing common challenges with male service members, as well as additional stressors, specific of being a woman in a traditionally male setting (Weatherill et al. 2011). Therefore, current research, from most part of the U.S. published articles, focuses on distinct topics, such as: (1) *sexual assault and harassment in active-duty military*; (2) *femininity and egalitarianism*; and (3) *posttraumatic stress disorder*. Questions of sexual assault and violence inside the

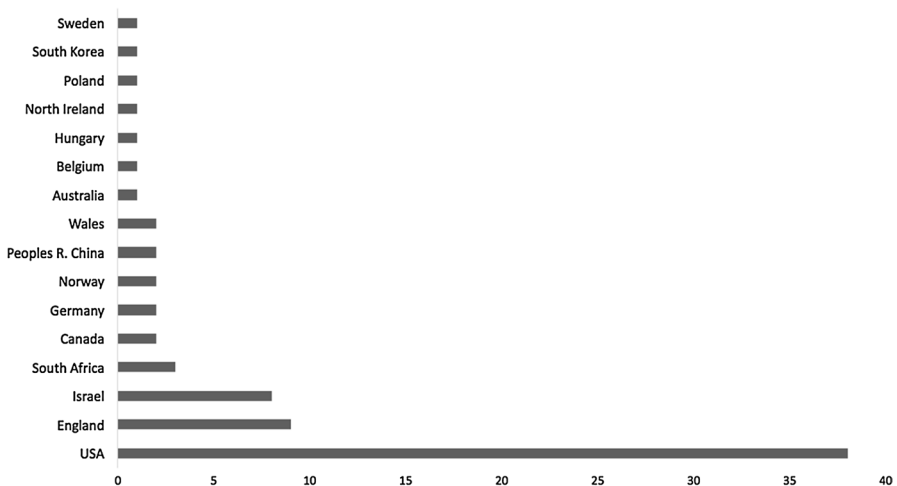


Fig. 1 Number of published articles by country

military have become a major source of tension, not only in the realm of civil–military relations but within the military institution itself (Carreiras 2015).

(1) *Sexual assault and harassment* Several research papers have highlighted that while the military has been somewhat successful in attempting to lower actual incidence of sexual harassment, the percentage of those experiencing such uninvited and unwanted behaviours remain high (Firestone and Harris 2003). Women are more likely to experience sexual harassment in some work settings than others (Vogt et al. 2007); work settings which have a larger percentage of male workers, include predominance of male supervisors, and represents traditional male occupations, may be places in which there is a greater tolerance for sexual harassment (Vogt et al. 2007), as for instance, the U.S. Army. As the global momentum towards acceptance of women in ground close combat continues to increase, the U.S. has decided in December 2015 to open all ground close combat roles to women without exception—a controversial and, some say, politically motivated decision (Fitriani and Matthews 2016). Although this decision will most likely encourage gender equality in a male-dominated culture (Bumiller and Shanker 2013), the increasing number of women in combat roles may potentiate the adverse experiences to women in a closer proximity to men in circumstances with little privacy (Mulrine 2013), especially as there is still a disproportionate number between servicewomen and servicemen. Further research is needed to understand women exclusion, such as sexual assault survivors who are deliberately but inaccurately given a personality disorder diagnosis which renders them ineligible for compensation (vide Tayyeb and Greenburg 2017).

(2) *Femininity and egalitarianism* The inclusion of women on the basis of a specific military femininity challenges the academic paradigm of women’s marginalization within military institutions (Greenburg 2017). A study from Brown (2012) realized that marginalization of women within recruiting advertisements reinforces the links between military service and masculinity. Brown (2012) argued that even the U.S. Army recruiting materials, which do the most to normalize women’s service and broaden definitions of femininity, limit their association with war fighting, moreover, women in Army ads are never anywhere near a rifle. Nevertheless, Greenburg’s (2017) article emphasises that female counterinsurgent teams from Afghanistan revealed how women’s military labour has become increasingly accepted, even embraced, particularly as it has moved away from humanitarian work and emphasized women’s utility to special operations. Although Weatherill’s et al. (2011) findings should be interpreted with caution, notably, the authors found that more egalitarian women reported significantly less sexual harassment victimization. Egalitarianism was earlier defined by Beere et al. (1984, p. 564) as “an attitude that allows one to respond to another individual independent of that other individual’s sex”. In this context, egalitarian women treat all individuals equally regardless of gender. This trait moves away from other attitudes, for instance—“the queen bee phenomenon whereby women leaders assimilate into male-dominated organizations (i.e. organizations in which most executive positions are held by men) by distancing themselves from junior women and legitimizing gender inequality in their organization” (Derks et al. 2016, p. 456). A frequently used and valid scale of gender-role attitudes is the Sex-Role Egalitarianism Scale (SRES) “developed to measure attitudes towards the equality of women and men across content domains representing

marital, parental, employment, social-interpersonal-heterosexual, and educational roles” (King and King 1997, p. 71). Due to promising outcomes, further research is suggested to know whether women in special operations forces (SOF) induce a reduction in marginalization or sexual harassment. SOF are highly selective, physically, and technically demanding, therefore, women may have the opportunity to evidence in real circumstances equal combat capabilities/skills as that of men.

(3) *Posttraumatic stress disorder* Women represent a growing minority in the U.S. military, facing common challenges with male service members as well as additional stressors specific to being a woman in a traditionally male setting (Weatherill et al. 2011). Several researchers argued that exposure to combat (Hourani et al. 2016), in-service sexual assault or harassment (Firestone and Harris 2003) both increase the risk of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, suicide attempts, substance abuse, physical health problems or anxiety (Vogt et al. 2007). It is therefore of paramount relevance to deepen research regarding the factors that may be unique to women’s health, well-being, and successful adjustment to the military (Weatherill et al. 2011; Hourani et al. 2016).

In contrast, published articles from England focused on topics such as: (1) *strategy developments* to allow new military roles for women (e.g. Woodward and Winter 2006); and (2) *new establishments for equal opportunities*, with the purpose to allow women in combat roles (e.g. Woodward and Winter 2006). These topics are also in line with other European countries, such as Norway (Robbins and Ben-Eliezer 2000) and Sweden (Alvinus et al. 2018) which are investing and supporting the visibility of women as leaders in the army.

Scientific research from Israel refer to (1) *femininity and egalitarianism*, that still hard to acknowledge in the Israeli Army as women are required to adapt to a masculine culture, rather than give them the opportunity to integrate in men’s roles (Brenner and Savran 2008); and (2) *conscription for Army service*, the role of servicemen is dominant in the Israeli Defence Forces and is distinct from that of females’. Both are required by law to serve in the nation’s Army, however, women mostly occupy subordinate roles, while the goals achieved by the male throughout his combat service (from which women are barred) render the male more valuable by the society (Golan 1997).

Current research reports that women serve in 95% of all U.S. Army occupations, and make up to 16.3% of active Army forces (Pawelczyk 2017). For that reason, this topic has deserved the growing interest from scholars. Therefore, the centrality of the United States as a gender case study is notorious. From the revised articles we note that the perspective for gender equality was highlighted not only in the U.S. homeland, but also abroad (Brown 2012; Greenburg 2017). The U.S. servicewomen operating overseas, such as in Afghanistan and Iraq, have made remarkable contributions to encourage and promote the integration of those women into their respective armed forces (Stachowitsch 2012). However, it is also relevant to point out that this game-changing situation is not straightforward. If on the one hand, some Iraqi women see the U.S. troops necessary to stop sectarian violence, others see the U.S. troops as a source of the conflict (Al-Ali and Pratt 2008). Figure 2 presents a timeline, concerning the published articles on gender issues in the military and makes a brief relation on the U.S. commitment.

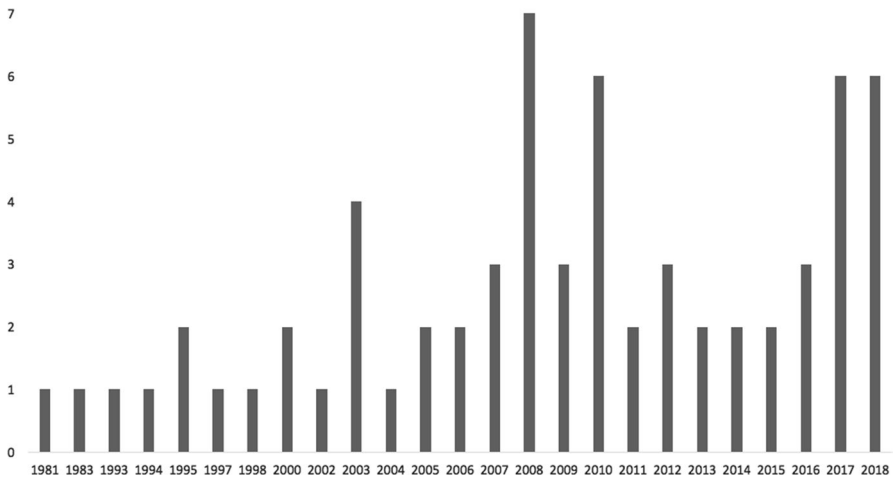


Fig. 2 Number of published articles by year

Between 2003 and 2013, women were virtually banned from ground combat missions in the U.S. military. Not surprisingly, in 2008 and 2010 there are peaks of published articles from several countries other than the U.S., and the existing research shows little focus on women's roles in combat operations. This trend has drastically changed after the recent lifting of the ban on women's service in combat roles, while scholars are focusing on studying the efficiency of that and other numerous measures that have been taken in the form of regulations and policies to advance the presence and position of women in the military (Pawelczyk 2017). Despite the efforts, obstacles which date from the beginning of the incorporation of women into the military still exist to some extent, in current days. Some of the challenges faced by women are due to their attempt to penetrate into historically male-dominated organizations, where traditional gender norms from families and societies prevail. In those cases, women tend to adapt their behaviour style in light of where they work (Alvinus et al. 2018). Several reasons were also cited for excluding women from combat roles. An important basis for this exclusion is that women are thought to intrude on the male bonding that is considered necessary for optimum combat performance (Firestone and Harris 2003), as well as physical and physiological constraints and the effect this would have on the male bond (Cock 1989; Wilén and Heinecken 2018). However, recent research seems to shed new light on the literature, devaluing and eliminating the mentioned restrictions. As Reis et al. (2020) who argue that due to some relevant changes in today's military, such as the integration of new technologies in combat operations and the valorisation of technical and intellectual abilities, there is no scientific evidence that exclude female participation in combat. On the contrary, the examples given by Reis et al. (2020) show not only the feasibility of women's integration in special forces and combat operations, but evidenced that female integration should be seen as new acting opportunities in all types of military operations.

Figure 3 shows the research areas concerning gender in the military. It was not surprising to find 66 articles that focus on *women's studies*, firstly, because it is related to the selection of keywords used in the WoS, and secondly because it is strictly related to femininity and egalitarianism themes. We have also found 11 articles relating to *public environmental occupational health*, as some studies about gender also focus on themes such as posttraumatic stress disorder. Lastly, 10 articles are related to social issues in the armed forces, as these publications focus on sexual assault and harassment.

Closely linked to the research areas, we have also explored the journal distribution list (Fig. 4) and the quality of its publications, by conducting a research on the *SCImago Journal & Country Rank* (SJR), which measures the journal's impact, influence or prestige (Table 2). We have selected SJR (by Scopus), because as opposed to of the *Journal Citation Reports* (JCR) (by WoS), it offers open access resources (Jacsó 2010), easily searchable by all researchers.

The *Women's Studies International Forum*, which has published a number of studied articles, seven in total, has focused on gender issues in the armed forces. Originally, this journal sought to criticize and reconceptualize existing knowledge, to examine and re-evaluate the manner in which knowledge is produced and distributed, and to assess the implications this has in women's lives (Elsevier 2018).

The Womens Studies International Forum receives articles from both scholars and practitioners, who are engaged in feminist research and desire to provide a significant contribution to women's lives. The results from the SCImago indicates another perspective, as we now refer to the top five journals—highest impact factor (Table 2).

The presented source titles (journals), especially the *Journal of Sex Roles*, provides a strong emphasis on original theoretical papers and review articles that explore how gender organizes people's lives and their surroundings, which is an

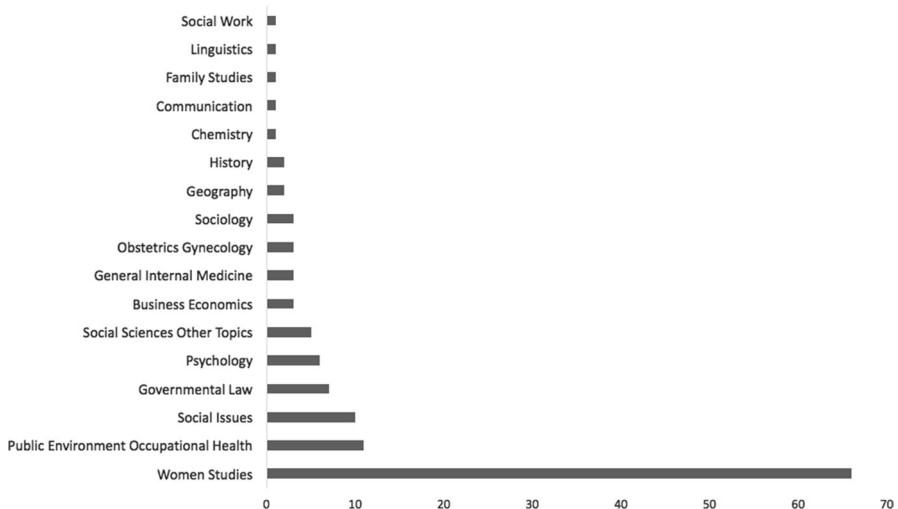


Fig. 3 Identified research areas

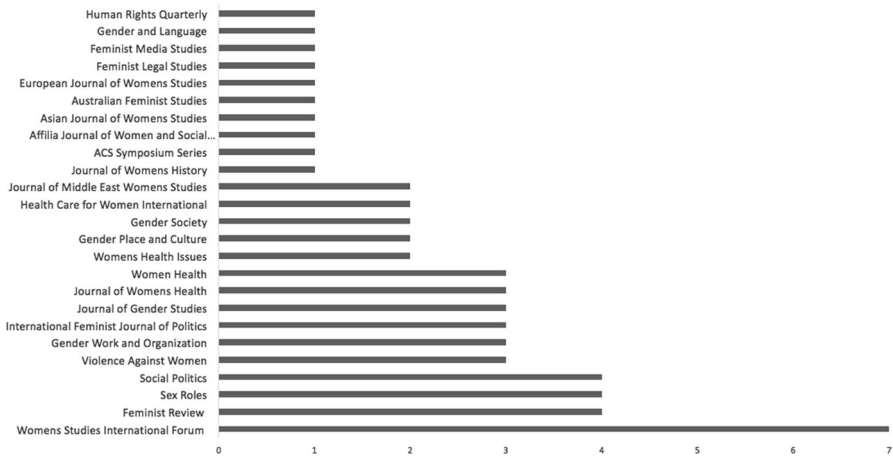


Fig. 4 Journal’s distribution list

Table 2 SCImago Country Ranking

Sources title	Quartile/H Index	Number of published articles
Sex Roles	Q1/93	4
J Journal of Women’s Health	Q1/82	3
Women & Health	Q1/82	3
Gender & Society	Q1/81	2
Violence Against Women	Q1/78	3

indication that this theme is largely being addresses by scholars—it mainly conceptualizes gender identities, belief systems, representations, interactions, relations, organizations, institution, and statuses (Springer 2018). Three of the articles published in the Journal of Sex Roles date from 1979 and 1983 and mainly focus on the initiated expansion of women’s role in the U.S. Army; while in 2011 a fourth article was published on the training experiences as mediators of the association between gender-role egalitarianism and Women’s adjustment, this time to Marine Recruitment. No wonder, quality journals are also those that attracted researchers who produced quality articles and who got the highest number of citations.

The authors’ record count (Fig. 5) identified 10 authors with the highest number of publications and citations. In fact, the WoS has identified John C. Woelfel as the author who published two articles (Woelfel 1981; Savell et al. 1979), while all the other authors were listed by alphabetical order with only one publication, which has not helped to draw large conclusions. For that reason, we had to include the citation record. Overall, the authors’ profile and affiliation gave us some clues as to how knowledge of gender studies was generated. For instance,

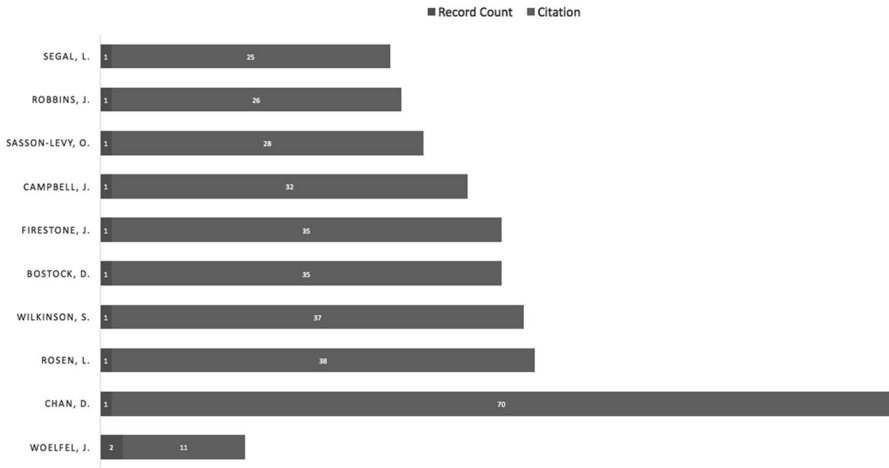


Fig. 5 Authors' record count

most articles, as well as the most cited, were written by mixed teams of male and female academics (Robbins and Ben-Eliezer 2000; Firestone and Harris 2003; Rosen et al. 2003; Bostock and Daley 2007; Chan et al. 2008; Wilkinson and Callister 2010), while in few cases were written individually or exclusively by men (Woelfel 1981) or by women (Campbell et al. 2003; Sasson-Levy 2007; Segal 2008). An additional and more focused study on this topic was recently published by Fox and Paine (2019). On the other hand, seven of the articles in Fig. 5 were written by civilian universities. In other words, one article was produced by the U.S. Army Research Institute for Behavioural and Social Sciences (Woelfel 1981) and two other articles were published by civilian universities in collaboration cooperation with a military institution and vice versa (Rosen et al. 2003; Bostock and Daley 2007). The above results may eventually mean that researchers working in military institutions continue to have a great opportunity to carry out gender studies (Alvinus et al. 2018). This opportunity is related to a number of benefits, including direct access to with the data that facilitates its collection or ease in obtaining institutional authorizations to carry out the research, just to name a few advantages. Corroborating Fig. 1, most of the cited research (Fig. 5) was written with the U.S. affiliation, which reinforces the centrality of the United States as a case study for gender studies in the military service.

Concluding Remarks

Gender inequalities still persist in military service in most Western democracies. References to social and cultural differences are observed in the existing literature, as the countries where combat experience is common, are still facing difficulties integrating women in their branches. Thus, it is fair to argue that women deserve equal opportunities across all branches and levels of responsibilities in Western

militaries. We have concluded that challenges, such as: *sexual assault and harassment, femininity and egalitarianism, and posttraumatic stress disorder*, which are identified as the major sources of tensions in the military institution, deserve to be studied. For instance, although several research papers have highlighted that the military has somewhat been successful in attempts to lower actual incidence of sexual harassment, the percentage remains high. Thus, these behaviours inside the military are still a major source of tension, especially in the U.S. Army.

We have also found some opportunities, as the expansion of women's roles in the Army, especially in ground combat roles, which are offering some advancements to this topic. However, some scholars are reluctant concerning the decision to increase the number of women in combat roles, as it may potentiate adverse experiences, due to closer proximity to men in circumstances with little or no privacy.

On the other side, research has also shown that more egalitarian women reported significant less sexual harassment victimization. Further empirical research is needed in order to ascertain whether women in special operations forces induce a reduction in marginalization or sexual harassment, as female counterinsurgent teams in Afghanistan revealed how women's military labour has become increasingly accepted, and even embraced, particularly as it has moved away from humanitarian work only. The publishing trend has changed drastically over the recent times. As women are now accepted to fill in combat positions, we are encouraging academics to pay due attention to the efficiency of the numerous measures that have been taken in the political sphere. In that regard, we have pointed out some prestigious journals that have been publishing both conceptual and empirical research, and which are seeking contributions in the area of gender inequality.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interests The authors declare they have no conflict of interests.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institution and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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