Solving 'the Uniform Issue': Gender and Professional Identity in the Swedish Military[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes empirical knowledge about the shifting ways in which the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) has articulated and addressed 'the uniform issue', that is, matters concerning servicewomen's access to adequate uniforms and other equipment, since the 1980s. Drawing on analytical tools employed within post-structural policy analysis, we demonstrate how 'the uniform issue' has gone from being articulated as a problem for *servicewomen, and to be solved* by *servicewomen, to a problem for the SAF in its pursuit to become an attractive employer and a legitimate public authority. By shedding light on how 'the uniform issue' has been problematized in shifting ways since Swedish women first were allowed to serve in all military positions, this article also contributes important insights into broader scholarly debates about workplace discrimination, gender equality, and gendered occupational identities in military work.*

KEYWORDS

Bodies / Discrimination / Gender equality / Military work / Uniforms / The Swedish Armed Forces

The uniform is a crucial marker of professional and workplace identity. The practice of 'putting on the uniform' is often iterated as a transformative process through which a private person becomes a professional nurse, firefighter, or soldier. It is also the uniform that visually distinguishes these professionals from one another and the ununiformed civilian, thus signaling a particular competence, authority, and status (Tynan & Godson 2019). More than allowing a person to be recognized as a professional, uniforms are crafted to facilitate and enable professionals to carry out particular tasks and, in some cases, protect them from potential harm. Both of these functions can be ascribed to the military uniform. The Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) has adopted a 400-page long uniform regalement that governs how every piece of clothing and equipment should be worn to best protect military personnel, to distinguish personnel from

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different military ranks and branches, and to signal a professional military identity to domestic audiences and national identity to international audiences (*Försvarsmakten* 2015a; see also Just et al. 2019). However, despite the military uniform's considerable practical and symbolic importance, it is not equally adapted to all military personnel.

As traditional male bastions, military institutions have long designed uniforms and equipment for a standardized male body (e.g., Just et al. 2019). This has practical implications for servicewomen who – on a group level – are provided with gear that is less fitting and thus less functional for their bodies. But uniforms designed for a standardized male body also affect women's chances of being accepted as military personnel. Given that military training and service has long been seen as a practice that 'makes men', putting on and carrying the military uniform has also become associated with performing masculinity (Peoples 2014; Tynan 2013). As a critical marker of masculinity, the military uniform – and even more so the ill-fitting uniform – arguably contributes to marking servicewomen as different from the male norm, in turn making it difficult for them to be recognized as 'real soldiers' (Bjerck 2013; Sløk-Andersen 2018).

How the SAF has articulated, addressed, or ignored problems surrounding the provision of functional and properly fitted military uniforms and equipment for servicewomen has changed over time. In 1991, shortly after all military positions were made available for women, a SAF working group on women's integration declared that the issue of providing servicewomen with appropriate uniforms and equipment was solved. This declaration was based on the decision to provide women officers with the opportunity to get their uniforms modified during pregnancy (*Försvarsstaben* 1990–1991). Since then, new issues with uniforms and equipment for servicewomen have been articulated and subsequently declared solved multiple times. In the spring of 2021, a SAF representative stated that all personal equipment would be 'gender equal' in five years (*SVT* 2021). Although much has changed, functional and appropriately fitted uniforms and equipment for women continue to be posed as a problem.

This article aims to contribute empirical knowledge about the shifting ways in which the SAF has *articulated* and *addressed* 'the uniform issue' since the 1980s, that is, the decade when women gained full access to the military profession. In so doing, we also demonstrate how discourses on uniforms and personal equipment for servicewomen have implications for broader issues concerning workplace discrimination, gender equality, and gendered occupational identities in military work. Drawing on analytical tools employed within post-structural policy analysis (see, e.g., Bacchi & Goodwin 2016), our study shows how 'the uniform issue' has been 'problematized' in at least three distinct ways, loosely corresponding to three time periods. More specifically, we demonstrate how 'the uniform issue' has gone from being articulated as a problem *for* servicewomen, and to be solved *by* servicewomen, to a problem for the SAF in its pursuit to become an attractive employer and a legitimate public authority.

By shedding light on how 'the uniform issue' has been problematized in shifting ways since Swedish women were first allowed to serve in all military positions, our article contributes important insights into broader scholarly debates on how women have, and continue to be, excluded from masculinized occupations and institutions such as the military. Despite mounting research on military gender integration in the Nordic region and beyond, few studies have specifically focused on the critical role of uniforms and equipment in facilitating the practical as well as symbolic exclusion *and* inclusion of military servicewomen (for essential exceptions, see Bjerck 2013; Kouri 2021;

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Sløk-Andersen 2018). Our vital research and results therefore offer a deeper understanding of the exclusionary conditions and structures that women encounter upon entry into the military workforce. Furthermore, the study enriches our understanding of how these structures are challenged and reproduced, and provides insights into the very (im)possibility of successfully gender-integrating masculinized military working life. These results also have implications for how we may comprehend the appeal of military security work as well as the societal legitimacy of the military institution at large.

Gender, uniforms, and military work

Research in the field of gender, work, and organizations has scrutinized how gender relations are reproduced, challenged, and negotiated in everyday work. Organizations can be described as 'melting pot[s] or "transformer[s]" where society's general perceptions and ideas of masculinity and femininity are produced' (Kvande & Rasmussen 1993: p. 47). In the Nordic countries, central areas of study within the field of gender, work, and organizations have included, for example, gendered divisions of labor (e.g., Bloksgaard 2011; Sundevall 2011), organizational cultures and norms (e.g., Berggren 2002; Ellingsen & Lilleaas 2020), and leadership and management (e.g., Katila & Eriksson 2013; Wahl 2014). In addition, recent years have seen an increased interest in the material aspects of how gender relations and occupational identities are constructed in organizations (Harrison & Olofsson 2016; Just et al. 2019; Kouri 2021). The present study adds to this emerging field, using everyday material objects such as uniforms and personal equipment to shed light on the interconnectedness of gender equality, workplace discrimination, and gendered occupational identities in military work.

During the past few decades, military organizations worldwide have become increasingly diverse in terms of gender. In the case of Sweden, the legal process of opening up all sections of the military workforce for women was finalized in 1989, when women were allowed to serve on submarines and combat aircraft (Persson & Sundevall 2019). While men still account for the vast majority of the military workforce, women's gradual integration has weakened the previously naturalized link between the military and men/masculinities in Sweden and elsewhere. Nonetheless, military working life has remained closely associated with masculine norms and structures, all of which have prevented women's full inclusion into military work. To be included in the soldier collective, the 'band of brothers', women have often been expected to adapt and play by rules set by men, for men (Persson 2011).

Uniforms can be considered as a materialization of such rules since 'putting on the uniform' signifies one way in which a civilian transforms into and 'becomes' a soldier or officer (Sløk-Andersen 2018). Several studies that analyze the material aspects of how gender relations and occupational identities are constructed in organizations have stressed the importance of uniforms (Bjerck 2013; Dahl 2013; Tynan & Godson 2019). The concept of aesthetic labor, which was initially developed to analyze the increasing 'lookism' of the service industry, has, for instance, been used to scrutinize how uniforms not only have practical, but also symbolic effects and importance (Dahl 2013). Kouri (2021) applies aesthetic labor in a study of Finnish soldiers and shows that an essential part of *doing the job* of a soldier is *looking the part* of a soldier.

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However, although the uniform marks and shapes occupational identities, its effects are somewhat contradictory (Tynan & Godson 2019). It has even been described as a site of tension and contention (Just et al. 2019). On the one hand, uniforms are designed to erase differences and can be considered a tool for inclusion. To wear a military uniform signals authority, strength, and mastery over one's body and emotions, over advanced technology, and over potential threats and dangers. Simply put, it marks the transition from civilian to military. With the military uniform comes a new identity, defined by membership in a masculine, uniformed and *uniform* collective, camaraderie, and 'brotherhood' (Tynan 2013; Peoples 2014).

On the other hand, uniforms tend to be inscribed with norms that make visible who does *not* fit into the ostensibly homogenous collective. In the context of military work, the uniform should therefore not be understood as simply extending a professional (masculine) identity to a pre-existing (empty, undefined) subject. Instead, how the uniform fits, and more broadly how it is worn, matters for whether or not a soldier is deemed high-performing and whether or not they are seen as part of the uniform(ed) collective. Sløk-Andersen (2018) has vividly illustrated how this phenomenon is gendered through her ethnographic study of Danish conscripts. During field training, Sløk-Andersen recalls being assigned short peeing breaks based on the time it took for male conscripts to turn away from one another and pee standing up, not the time it took for her to find a shielded location, lower her uniform pants, and squat. Sløk-Andersen and the other women conscripts would get back in line last after the pee breaks; she recalls how this negatively affected her recognition as a 'good soldier' (ibid: p. 18). A study on Israeli servicewomen have similarly showed how women experienced urination on field missions as highly stressful because they were wearing uniforms designed for the male body (e.g., uniform pants with a 'little hole' for peeing). The authors demonstrate how the design of the uniform rendered urination – a quintessentially *human* concern – a women-specific problem; yet another example of their failure to adapt to the masculine military (Harel-Shalew & Daphna-Tekoah 2020: pp. 81–82). Consequently, even though military uniforms are designed to induct individuals to a professional, uniform(ed) collective, they may also, albeit unintentionally, exclude servicewomen or other bodies not defined as the 'standard' male.

Studying the 'problem' of uniforms and equipment for servicewomen

This study is based on a broad range of sources, including interviews, archival documents, media reports, and official statements. Interviews were conducted with 12 civilian and military (current or former) employees of the SAF and one official whom the government previously employed to investigate Sweden's military personnel provision system.[1] Depending on their roles and background within the SAF, the interviewees were asked about their own experiences with military uniforms and equipment and how they dealt with potential issues. Interviewees were also asked whether they considered there was or had been a 'problem' with providing fitting and functional uniforms and equipment for women, and if so, whether things have improved, if problems remain, and, if so, why.

Additionally, we combined searches in military archive collections, specialized military magazines, and digitalized media archives for documented discussions

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within the SAF as well as stakeholder organizations such as the Conscripts' Council (*Värnpliktsrådet*) and the Association of Military Officers (*Officersförbundet*) on uniforms and equipment for servicewomen from the 1980s and onwards. For instance, we noticed that archival documents from the 1990s kept referring to the design of a 'mammadräkt' ('mum uniform'), a term that also generated several hits in the media archive. From these articles, statements from SAF officials were collected and included in the empirical data. Consequently, the SAF's articulation of 'the uniform issue' is accessed through SAF interviews, media statements, policy documents, and working documents, as well as from programs, reports, and statements from stakeholder organizations. All material was compiled into a chronological timeline after collection.

When referring to 'the problem' with uniforms and equipment for servicewomen, we do not invoke the idea of a problem as something pre-discursive, already defined, or evident to all who encounter it. Instead, in our understanding, a 'problem' is shaped by discourse, and more specifically by efforts to define and address 'it'. To conceptualize this distinction, we invoke a term often used in post-structural analysis of policy or institutional change and speak instead of the *problematization* of uniforms and equipment for servicewomen (e.g., Bacchi & Goodwin 2016). The term problematization draws attention to the discursive process through which questions are *made* into 'problems', which appear knowable, relatable, and possible to address. Moreover, how a problem is articulated regulates *how* it can be handled – or rather if and how it appears worthwhile, rational, and desirable to address. The articulation of a problem also affects if and when it can be declared 'solved'. Approaching 'the uniform issue' as constantly made and re-made allows us to lay bare how, when, and why 'it' has been declared solved so many times over the past four decades, and still keeps reappearing.

When examining how women's access to proper uniforms and equipment is problematized through the material outlined above, we first analyzed our timeline, searching for articulations of 'the problem' and after that looked for articulations of how it was, or should be, addressed. In the first step, we asked: *is* it a problem? If so, for whom? (*the SAF, servicewomen or the individual soldier?*) What kind of problem is this? (*Is it about the lack of equality or justice? Is it an operational issue? A personnel issue? A work environment or safety issue? A legitimacy issue? Or is it women's presence, bodies, or failure to adapt that pose as the problem?*). In the second step, we asked how is or should the problem be addressed, if at all? (*By one-time or selective measures such as paying women to buy underwear or ordering smaller uniform sizes? Or by structural, systemic transformations such as updating the anthropometric data upon which acquisitions are made? By time-restricted projects or by institutionalized routines?*) And where and by whom should the problem be addressed? (*By the individual soldier, servicewomen, or the SAF? And if the latter, centrally or locally?*).

From the answers we received by asking these questions, three primary problematizations appeared to emerge, which loosely corresponded to three time periods. These periods will organize how we present our analysis in the following sections. First, it is crucial to underline that these phases, like all discourses, are mutually constitutive and unstable. It is possible to distinguish more than one (hegemonic *and* counter-hegemonic) problematization in the empirical material representing each phase. While the following analysis will note and exemplify discursive struggles over how 'the uniform issue' is to be

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problematized, these struggles do not constitute the focus of our analysis. Lastly, when presenting our three phases below, we continuously rely on both official documents and statements *and* recollections and experiences of wearing the uniform accessed either through interviews or media sources.

Problematizing fitting and functional military equipment and uniforms for servicewomen

Phase 1 (1980–2000): Women's problem, women's responsibility

In 1983, the same year as women gained access to the vast majority of military positions (Persson & Sundevall 2019), a magazine published by the Swedish Defence Material Administration (SDMA) set out directions for women officer's uniforms and equipment, concluding that:

> There must also be gender equality when it comes to uniforms […] No special designs for girls. If you chose the same training and profession [as men], you also want to look like your male colleagues. (*FMV-Aktuellt* 1983: p. 3)

In this declaration, gender equality appears to mean that no separate uniform systems will be designed for servicewomen (see also Gerendas 2016) and that servicewomen should adapt to the uniform(ed), masculine military. Despite this understanding of uniformity and equality, the article states that some modifications will be made to women's so-called dress uniforms to fit women's body composition better. The article also mentions in passing that women's 'skirts and pants will look the same' in the Army, the Air Force, and the Navy (*FMV-Aktuellt* 1983: p. 3), seemingly taking for granted that the skirt should remain a standard component of servicewomen's dress uniforms. However, when it came to the field uniform and military equipment such as backpacks and helmets, the article declares that 'no adjustments will be made for the benefit of women, all equipment will be shared' (ibid). In 1987, a new daily dress (m/87) was adopted, following the directives set out by the SDMA, and in 1990, the SAF acquired the first field uniform (m/90) shared by men and women (Gerendas 2016). The decision to make minor adaptations of the dress uniform for women by providing a skirt-option and more form-fitted jackets, but not adapting the field uniform, arguably demonstrate the most important role and place imagined for women in the SAF at this time. Although women had been granted access to almost all military positions, the field appeared to remain a strictly male habitat.

From the perspective of the SAF, servicewomen's access to functional and fitting uniforms and equipment was thus a problem that appeared to be solved already in the 1980s. Put differently, the issue was problematized in a way that made it seem as if it was already addressed and solved. Women were clearly expected to adapt and assimilate to the masculine military collective, and one way of doing so was to 'look like their male colleagues' (*FMV-aktuellt* 1983: p. 3). Nevertheless, the experience of adaptation appears more problematic for servicewomen than official documents from the time reveal. As one servicewoman who started basic military training in 1983 recalls:

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> From my experience, the way we were encountered early on in my career was like … […] *you have chosen to be here. Now you have to accept it. This is what's offered. Bite the bullet. You're welcome.* Yes, but it doesn't fit. *Don't care. Take it. You're here on the same conditions as us.* That's how it was in the 80s. (Interviewee 1)

The fact that women were not conscripted into the SAF like men were in this time period appears to justify adaptation (to material standards based on the body of an average male conscript) as a solution to 'the uniform issue'. This conditioned inclusion, based on women's assimilation, extended far beyond uniforms during this period. Women who entered the military profession in the 1980s describe an overall culture of 'if you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen', which included putting up with sexual harassment, misogynist jargon, and discrimination (Pettersson et al. 2008).

In 1990, the commander in chief of the SAF instituted a working group for women officers that was expected to 'solve potential problems that arise due to women's access to all military occupational arenas' (*Försvarsstaben* 1990). According to the group's minutes, it discussed 'uniform issues' during four of its first five meetings. The first question raised was the need to develop a uniform for pregnant servicewomen as 'current solutions are not compatible with official regalement' (ibid). In the words of one interviewee, before the first woman officer got pregnant, 'no one seems to have thought: right, women will get pregnant, how do we handle the uniform issue?' (Interviewee 1). She recalls that the first pregnant officer in her unit ended up going to the regiment sewer who added elastic fabric to the waistband of her uniform pants. The same pants were passed around between multiple servicewomen (ibid). Interviewees describe how women found ways to make the uniforms fit while pregnant, for example, by adding wedges of extra fabric, Velcro straps, or by using suspenders. Not only did these efforts constitute a breach of the official uniform regalement, several servicewomen interviewees also remember feeling that the home-sown uniform pants made them look ugly or 'like clowns'. In a letter sent to the SAF headquarters in 1995, one servicewoman brought attention to the lack of both official solutions and instructions regarding uniforms for pregnant officers and described how servicewomen were forced to come up with their own 'ridiculous solutons' ['jippolösningar'] (Sjöblom 1995).

Servicewomen's stories of home-sown pregnancy pants are illustrative of how uniform items may end up differentiating some soldiers and officers, instead of making them 'uniform'. Moreover, the fact that none of our interviewees can recall a military leader correcting or problematizing pregnant servicewomen's breach of regalement in this period, or providing them with appropriate apparel, also render (pregnant) women officers 'different.' By not being corrected for failing to 'look like a soldier' through the successful performance of aesthetic labor (Kouri 2021), the pregnant servicewoman is placed outside of – and not as a representative for – the uniform(ed) military profession and collective. In this context, uniforms tweaked with wedges and suspenders or other 'ridiculous solutions' appear as a stark contrast to the professional identity, status, and authority usually associated with a military uniform.

In the following meetings, the working group continued to discuss alternatives for pregnancy uniforms and raise broader issues about if and for how long a pregnant officer could continue working and be assigned a wartime post in the Swedish defense. The group also raised questions such as, 'Can a woman officer wear pants as part of her evening dress?', '[W]hat in general does the regalement say about shoes [for women]?' and

'What regulations do we have on the use of underwear?' (*Försvarsstaben* 1990–1991). It seems that servicewomen in the working group articulated 'the uniform issue' as a lack of instructions, which in turn prohibited women officers from following official regalement and becoming part of the uniform(ed) collective. Not knowing what was expected from them by an organization that regulated every detail of every piece of equipment was articulated as the main problem, hindering servicewomen from being recognized as 'real soldiers'. In contrast, we have found no documentation from that period where the SAF or its servicewomen articulate 'the uniform issue' as a source of discrimination, a safety or work environment issue, or an obstacle preventing them from physically carrying out tasks required of a soldier.

After women officers had problematized the lack of underwear and pregnancy clothing through the working group: *how and by whom was the issue addressed?* Although underwear for men was included in the uniform regalement and provided to male conscripts and officers, we have found no evidence from this period indicating that the SAF considered developing panties and bras and making them standard supply. Instead, it was decided that women conscripts and officers should be granted financial compensation to buy (and wash) their own underwear.[2] The only exception to this rule seems to have been that the SAF made one-time purchases of flame-retardant underwear for servicewomen deployed on international UN missions (Interviewee 1). The solution of allowing women to buy their own personal gear against financial compensation was also applied to other items such as boots in smaller sizes (Interviewee 3).

Regarding pregnancy clothing, the working group's efforts resulted in the SAF and the SDMA developing patterns for a line of pregnancy items: a pair of pregnancy field pants, a dress and a tunic, and pants and a jacket to be worn with the dress uniform (*Försvarsmakten* 1999). However, none of these items were made standard supply. Instead, pregnant servicewomen had to initiate the process of ordering the dress and tunic and getting their uniform pants and jackets modified after the official pattern (*Försvarsstaben* 1990–1991; see also *Försvarsmakten* 2009a). The patterns were most likely used from the early-1990s,[3] but they were introduced in the official uniform regalement for the first time in 1999 under the name 'mum uniform' ['mammadräkt'] (*Försvarsmakten* 1999).

The SAF thus addressed the problem of non-existent underwear and pregnancy attire by placing the responsibility on servicewomen to buy or order their own – or by selective, one-time or short-term solutions such as mass-purchases. The servicewomen and the SAF representatives who were interviewed repeatedly stressed that these solutions differentiated servicewomen from the collective by not only making them look different but also by opening them up to criticism for being a financial burden to the SAF. One servicewoman recalls getting ill-meaning comments from male colleagues questioning how much her 'special boots' cost – boots she had been forced to buy herself because her size was not provided (Interviewee 3). She also recalls getting similar questions about the cost of her pregnancy uniform.

Consequently, in the first phase approximately spanning 1980–2000, functional and fitting uniforms and equipment for servicewomen were rarely articulated as a problem by the SAF. Instead, it was talked about as something that was or would be solved by requiring servicewomen to adapt as well as by designing a 'mum uniform' and by providing financial compensation for missing items. The solution was thus to render servicewomen responsible for their adaptation to the masculine collective by providing

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themselves with personal gear and, sometimes, by simply 'biting the bullet'. After all, this was a period where women were constantly described as not forced to but 'wanting' to serve in the SAF. Therefore, it is not surprising that servicewomen only articulated what appeared to be minimal and necessary demands, such as *what underwear am I allowed to use?* By making servicewomen responsible for issues like underware, or making one-time purchases that did not challenge the SAF material provision and logistics machinery, servicewomen were also rendered perpetual exceptions and not 'real soldiers'. In a military collective distinguished by its uniformity, it is inconceivable that a majority of soldiers and officers would be made responsible for buying and washing their own underwear or ordering their own uniforms.

Phase 2 (2000–2015): Women's problem, SAF's responsibility

The lack of military underwear for women was raised by servicewomen at the Conscripts' Council's congress in 1998. A servicewoman interviewed by a national newspaper stated that she had no problem using men's underpants, but that she had 'a big wound and a scar' after using a civilian bra during a march and wanted a proper military bra (*Expressen* 1998: p. 9). We identified this as the earliest example where uniforms and equipment (or lack thereof) were discussed as a work environment problem for servicewomen. This is a discourse, we suggest, that became prominent in the 2000s.

This problematization of the 'uniform issue' as an occupational health and safety problem must be understood in a broader context of discrimination against servicewomen. In 1999, a survey initiated by the National Defence College revealed that a majority (84%) of servicewomen reported being exposed to sexual harassment and violence within the ranks in the previous 24 months (Berggren & Ivarsson 2002). The survey sent shockwaves through the organization. It became the start of a new understanding of gender equality, focusing on structural inequality and discrimination, which gained momentum after the existing adapt and adjust discourse.

One of the studies that followed up on the original survey raised the issue of uniforms and equipment (Ivarsson et al. 2005). The data, further analyzed by Nilsson (2010), showed that two-thirds of the women conscripts and officers interviewed were dissatisfied with their personal or shared equipment. Servicewomen stressed that both the fit and the size of the uniforms and equipment were poor, resulting in injuries that prevented servicewomen from doing their jobs and left them with a feeling of being inferior to their male colleagues. From the mid-2000s, servicewomen's right to functional and fitting uniforms and equipment was also actively pushed by the Conscripts' Council (e.g., *Värnpliktsrådet* 2006). Moreover, sexual harassment and ill-fitting uniforms and equipment for servicewomen became critiqued by politicians in this period, and the latter was the subject of an inquiry from parliament to the defense minister in 2006 and became a government directive to the SAF in the same year (see *Sveriges Rikstag* 2006).

These reports, reactions, and directives sparked several official responses from the military institution. In 2003, the SAF adopted its first gender equality plan (Nilsson 2010). Personnel resources were now devoted to combating sexual harassment and discrimination and attending to the recruitment and retention of servicewomen (Interviewee 3). One servicewoman who worked at the Headquarters at this time explained that although the sexual harassment problem received the most attention, this push for gender equality

also enabled the SAF to address uniform issues (ibid). In 2009, the SAF's gender equality plan mentioned personal equipment for the first time: it declared that between 2009 and 2011, the SAF would ensure that 'adapted personal equipment is accessible for both women and men' (*Försvarsmakten* 2009b: p. 11). It was further established that 'a gender perspective should be applied to all new material and equipment acquisitions' (ibid; repeated in *Försvarsmakten* 2012).

Consequently, our empirical material shows that a broad range of actors began to articulate ill-fitting or non-existent uniforms and equipment for servicewomen as both a work environment and a gender equality problem during a period spanning approximately between 2000 and 2015. Nevertheless, *how and by whom was the problem addressed?* When the SAF answered this question in a newspaper interview in 2006 and in an internal memorandum in 2007, they stressed efforts to further form-fit the dress uniform for women. Moreover, the SAF underlined that boots and helmets were available in a broader range of sizes since 2005 and that the rifle AK 5 was provided with an adjustable butt-end since 2006 (Nilsson 2010; *Norbottens-Kuriren* 2006). In other words, and in contrast to the previous phase of adaptation, the SAF appeared to take measures to alter some combat or field-kits, even though no adjustments were made to the fit of the field uniform (*Artilleriregementet* 2014). SAF representatives also stressed that efforts to adapt the combat belt and body-protection armor were ongoing.

Our source material from this period repeatedly stressed that the SAF's body armor does not fit women's bodies. For example, one servicewoman, who describes herself as 'not very tall, but not tiny either' explains how the part of the armor meant to protect her thighs instead covered her knees, thus preventing her from moving as quickly as her male colleagues (Interviewee 3; see also *Artilleriregementet* 2014). The Conscripts' Council also repeatedly brought attention to ill-fitting body armor and its magazine cited a servicewoman declaring that 'body-armors are not designed to fit a pair of breasts' (*Värnpliktsnytt* 2009:9: p. 6). In 2012, six years after the SAF declared body armor for women under development, Swedish radio reported that the armor continued to cause injuries for servicewomen, including bruises, skin chafing, and inflammation in the shoulders (*SR* 2012).

In this period, the SAF's earlier decision not to provide servicewomen with military underwear was also called into question on safety grounds. In 2006, several media sources reported that the development of underwear for servicewomen was ongoing and expected to be finalized in 2007. It appears that the SAF was initially planning only to design military underpants. As one SAF representative declared in an interview, 'With regards to a bra, it has been concluded that it is impossible to develop unitary models' (*Norrbottens-Kuriren* 2006). However, later the same year, the SDMA demonstrated prototypes of a pair of panties and a sports bra (*Värnpliktsnytt* 2006:14: p. 6). Several media sources reporting on this development underlined that civilian underwear is flammable and might lead to burns and emphasized that fire-proof underwear is essential for servicewomen on international deployment (ibid; see also *SR Östergötland* 2006). It is therefore likely that Sweden's increased commitment to international missions during this period – and women's presence within these missions – contributed to pushing the SAF towards articulating non-existent underwear for servicewomen as a problem.

However, addressing 'the underwear issue' appears to have been difficult. Rather than being finished in 2007, the first pair of underpants and bra were delivered to the SAF's central stockroom three years later (*Värnpliktsnytt* 2010:2: p. 6). In 2010,

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the SAF also began developing a field bra, which was likely delivered the year after (Interviewee 1). The Conscripts' Council's magazine *Värnpliktsnytt* reported on the SAF's efforts to address the issue repeatedly in the late 2000s. It declared in 2008 – under the headline 'finally' – that after three failed attempts, the SDMA had now developed a test collection of underwear for servicewomen. In 2009, the magazine repeatedly reported that servicewomen still lacked underwear. In 2010, it concluded that underwear 'finally' had been delivered to the SAF central stockroom, while also noting that only two out of 23 regiments had begun the distribution to servicewomen (*Värnpliktsnytt* 2006–2010).

In 2011, when several media outlets reported on the SAF's launch of underwear for servicewomen, one of them cited a SAF representative declaring that this must be considered 'a milestone for the SAF's gender equality work' (*Tidningen Ångermanland* 2011). However, despite this declaration of progress, 'the underwear issue' appeared to remain unsolved. In the following years, several newspapers and statements from servicewomen established that the new SAF underpants were uncomfortable and caused skin chafing around the waist, thighs, groins, and bottom and that women preferred to use men's underwear or continue to buy their own (*Motala och Vadstena Tidning* 2011; *Artilleriregementet* 2014). Moreover, the field bra – designed with a front zipper to enable servicewomen to wash swiftly in the field – was broadly described as uncomfortable and painful, causing chafes between the breasts when worn under the body armor (*Artilleriregementet* 2014; Interviewee 4).

As a result, key stakeholders continued to articulate problems with functional and fitting uniforms and equipment for women throughout this phase. In 2013, for example, the Association of Military Officers launched a report based on a questionnaire sent to women members, which showed that despite grand declarations of gender equality in policy, servicewomen continued to experience problems with personal equipment. According to the report, poor uniforms and equipment were problems of inclusion – since it made women feel unwelcome – and safety (*Officersförbundet* 2013).

The articulation of uniforms and equipment as a work environment and safety issue was also echoed by SAF working groups for women's inclusion. For example, a report written by servicewomen in the artillery regiment A9 discussed how the fit of the uniform system m/90 caused risks and strain injuries for servicewomen and men who were outside the norm of a standardized male body (*Artilleriregementet* 2014; see also Bjerck 2013). Like the report from the officer association, the A9-report stressed how malfunctioning and ill-fitting uniforms and equipment created a feeling of not belonging or being excluded, stating that 'Clothes that don't fit symbolize an individual that doesn't fit in' (*Artilleriregementet* 2014: p. 8). Despite the SAF's efforts to take responsibility for 'the uniform issue' and address it as a gender equality problem among many, the issue not only remained a problem for servicewomen but a problem they at times continued to be held responsible for solving, for instance when forced to continue buying or requesting equipment and when attempting to push the issue through working groups.

This section has delineated how access to functional uniforms and equipment was articulated as a problem for servicewomen by a range of actors between 2000 and 2015. This articulation was initially part of a broader problematization of gendered working conditions, sexual harassment, and discrimination in the armed forces. In this period, 'the uniform issue' was described as a gender equality problem that negatively affected the safety, inclusion, and recognition of servicewomen as 'real soldiers'. We have also shown that the primary responsibility for addressing this issue was placed on the SAF

(not only by servicewomen and SAF representatives but also by the government) and that the SAF took several selective measures to address it. Some of these solutions intended to be long-term, such as providing a broader range of sizes and adjustable rifles as well as developing underwear. Yet, none of the proposed interventions were structural: the solutions did not transform how the SAF designed, acquired, distributed, or evaluated uniforms and equipment (see also Nilsson 2010). This would begin to change in the next phase.

Phase 3 (2015–): The SAF's problem, the SAF's responsibility

In response to the government's instruction to implement gender mainstreaming efforts in all public authorities in Sweden, the SAF presented its first gender mainstreaming plan in 2013. One of the aims set out by the plan was to conduct an overview of the material provision process to 'get to the bottom of the problems related to equipment for servicewomen' (*Försvarsmakten* 2013: p. 21). When the plan was updated two years later, physical work environment and personal equipment were declared a priority (*Försvarsmakten* 2015b). One SAF official stated: 'when we began scratching the surface of the gender mainstreaming project, it became clear that women were not favored when it came to suitable personal gear' (Interviewee 5). Another SAF employee told us that it was servicewomen's efforts to map and push equipment-related problems (e.g., the A9-report), combined with crucial support from the local leadership, that enabled uniforms and equipment to be articulated as an area in need of gender mainstreaming (Interviewee 6).

In the context of the gender mainstreaming project, 'the uniform issue' appears to be given a new frame or overarching problematization, as official documents begin using the term *usability* (*Försvarsmakten* 2015bc). The idea was to improve the usability of all material and personal gear by transforming how the SAF perceived the relationship between humans and machines/equipment. This was to be achieved through an approach called Human Factors Integration (HFI):

> [T]he SAF demands that all materials should fit all personnel, independent of sex and size. The material directly determines how well soldiers, sailors, and officers can perform. Everyone should have access to safe, suitable, and efficient material. Since the era of [male] conscription, defense material has been adapted to the measurements of a standard male body. Women are more likely than men to experience that the material lacks fit and suitability. Material systems should maintain and increase operational capacity. If the user is restricted, the system's aim will not be realized. (*Försvarsmakten* 2015b)

With this problematization, the SAF did not articulate functional and fitting uniforms and equipment for servicewomen as a separate issue. Instead, they stressed that 'a gender-equal workplace is *one* of several desired outcomes when implementing HFI' (ibid, emphasis added), predicting improvements for all military personnel.

The articulation of uniforms and equipment as a potential safety risk was still part of the problematization of 'the uniform issue' in this phase, but new problem articulations emerged. HFI documents repeatedly stressed that personal gear had implications for military personnel's performance (*Försvarsmakten* 2015c) and ability to 'contribute

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with their full potential' (*Försvarsmakten* 2015b: p. 31). The 'combat efficiency' of each soldier and officer was, in turn, seen as key for the SAF's overall operational effectiveness (ibid). HFI was also described as 'strengthening the SAF's attraction/recruitment capacity, efforts to retain personnel and public brand' (*Försvarsmakten* 2015b: p. 30). In contrast to previous phases, what emerges in these documents is an articulation of 'the uniform issue' as not only a problem for servicewomen *but a problem for the SAF*, in particular for its operational effectiveness and ability to recruit and retain soldiers.

Between 2010 and 2018, as a result of the government's decision to deactivate conscription for men, the SAF was an all-volunteer force, recruiting its servicewomen and servicemen in competition with other employers in the labor market (Strand 2019). In contrast to previous phases, the SAF now became fully reliant on its ability to attract and appeal to young individuals so that they would *choose* to embark on a military rather than a civilian career (Gillberg et al. 2021). In this context, ill-fitting, malfunctioning, or unsafe uniforms and equipment emerge as a potential problem for the recruitment and retention of servicewomen, which was particularly problematic in light of the SAF's oft-declared ambitions to recruit *more* women (Strand 2019). Initially, this problematization appears to have been pushed by servicewomen themselves (see, e.g., *Artilleriregementet* 2014) but, after 2015, it was broadly adopted also by the military institution.

The articulation of fitting and functional uniforms and equipment for servicewomen as an issue of recruitment and retention remained even as Sweden reactivated conscription for both men and women in 2017. A government report on conscription found it 'counterproductive to suggest any special measures, modified demands or other measures which build on and manifest a separation of the sexes' and concluded that such a separation does not characterize 'a modern and inclusive employer' (SOU 2016:63: p. 228). In this spirit, the report recommended that women's right to financial compensation for underwear be withdrawn. It declared the successful provision of personal equipment for servicewomen an issue of great 'signaling value' and underlined that 'conscription is now gender neutral' (ibid: p. 229, 235). Several interviewees emphasized this 'signaling' or 'symbolic' value. 'The uniform issue' is thus articulated as a problem for – but also a potential asset in – the SAF's broader efforts to gain public trust and legitimacy by building a 'modern,' 'progressive' and 'gender-conscious' public brand (Strand & Kehl 2019).

In 2019, the SAF's efforts to gender integrate uniforms and personal equipment continued through the project *Gender Equal Material Provision*, which problematized 'the uniform issue' in the following way:

> The problem with personal equipment for women has been known for a long time, and addressing this issue has been a pronounced task and goal for equally long. The failure to solve this problem, including the reproduction of the problem through the acquisition of new material, is, therefore, a problem in itself. There is thus evidence to support that personal equipment deficiency, particularly for women, is a symptom of a bigger problem that must be solved if these deficiencies are to be sustainably and permanently addressed. The underlying problem connected to our equipment deficiencies is that the SAF does not have a gender-equal system for material provision. (*Försvarsmakten* 2019)

The SAF's failure to address 'the uniform issue' in the 40 years that women have been allowed to serve as officers now became part of the problematization and caused the SAF to declare that the material provision process discriminates against women on a

group level. This gender mainstreaming effort did not, in line with the examples above, articulate the lack of fitting and functional uniforms and equipment as a problem for servicewomen alone, but a problem for the SAF. The project plan declared that an unequal material provision process produces 'distrust between the SAF as an employer and its employees (current and future)' (ibid). Several interviewees similarly articulated 'the uniform issue' as a problem for the SAF's credibility and legitimacy among the broader public.

So, how was this structural problematization of 'the uniform issue' addressed in this third phase? The articulation of the uniform as a recruitment, retention, and 'image' problem appeared to enable a new kind of solution. In this period, the SAF launched several recruitment campaigns directed at and aimed at attracting women by posing and reassuringly answering questions such as 'will I find a bra in my size?' and 'will I find boots in my size?' on billboards, magazines, social media, and the SAF website (*Försvarsmakten* 2018).

Moreover, the *Gender Equal Material Provision* project identified several ways in which the SAF's material provision process discriminated against women and identified efforts to address these (see *Försvarsmakten* 2020). For example, the project concluded that the body composition and anthropometric data upon which military equipment and materials were developed was based primarily on data pertaining to men. As a result, it did not matter that the SAF provided a wider variety of sizes: the 'fit' of the items would still be less favorable for most women (Interviewee 4). Moreover, the project concluded that the established sizing system used by the military (small, medium, large) did not translate well onto a uniform item such as the bra, which demands a system including both width and cup (ibid). In addition to sizes and fit, the SAF concluded that servicewomen's access to fitting uniforms and equipment was compromised by a logistics system that incentivizes only keeping the most common (i.e., not the smallest) sizes on the local regiment storages to minimize costs. This meant that servicewomen as a whole had to wait for a more extended period before receiving, for example, boots in the correct size. The project also concluded that the routines followed to modify uniforms when servicewomen got pregnant, such as sending them to a sewer for modification, took too long, often resulting in the uniform being delivered after the baby was born (ibid).

These problematizations resulted in an action plan with a range of efforts to address 'the uniform issue' as a structural and organizational problem. Many of these efforts were designed to move the responsibility for acquiring functional and fitting uniforms from servicewomen to the SAF and its logistics systems. For instance, this was to be achieved by developing a new 'bra solution' (so that women do not have to buy their bras to avoid skin chafing), by providing sanitary protection such as tampons (so that servicewomen do not have to purchase and bring their own) and to develop a new pregnancy uniform easily accessible for servicewomen (so that servicewomen do not have to initiate the process of acquiring, adjusting and then waiting for new uniforms). Rather than articulating these solutions as exceptions or 'women-specific', they are expressed as part of the daily routines and systems of the military logistics machinery. The pregnancy uniform is, for instance, understood in a larger context of 'bodily transformations' that uniform systems must facilitate, also encompassing young conscripts getting in better shape and general officers getting out of shape. Similarly, the provision of sanitary products is described as just as 'natural' for the military machinery as the provision of bullets and food (Interviewee 4), which also became the message of a brand-building campaign

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distributed to young women on social media in 2021 (*Försvarsmakten* 2021). Moreover, the new pregnancy uniform was to be re-designed. Citing the experience of one previously pregnant servicewoman, who allegedly felt like 'the woman in Sound of Music' when wearing the pregnancy tunic, one interviewee said:

> [I]f we are to design a 'mum collection', and the mother-to-be should represent the military profession, which bluntly put, is about engaging in combat and killing people, then you cannot feel like the clothes you're wearing make you look like a freaking clown – if I'm pushing it. It doesn't work. And many [servicewomen] say: *I refuse to wear these things*. […] So, we have decided that the military profession must be central also when we design clothing for mothers… not just take the ones we have and alter them so that they fit someone pregnant. No, they must convey what a uniform is supposed to convey. (Interviewee 4)

In contrast to how the 'mum uniform' was described in the first phase, the pregnant woman is perceived as a representative of the military profession in this phase. She is seemingly included in the uniform(ed) collective and should therefore signal the authority associated with military security work. That is, the ability to not only give but also take life.

The examples above show how a structural problematization of uniforms and equipment for servicewomen – here understood as resulting from a discriminatory military logistics system, rather than from women's failure to adapt (like in phase 1) or the lack of items or sizes (like in phase 2) – has opened up new and more systemic ways of imagining solutions to 'the uniform issue'. In Phase 3, 'the uniform issue' became broadly articulated as affecting not only servicewomen but also the SAF as a brand, an employer, and a public authority. The issue was further delineated as something which negatively impacts the SAF's combat efficiency, legitimacy, and ability to recruit and retain personnel. We have also shown how efforts to solve 'the uniform issue' planned or implemented in this phase have shifted the responsibility of acquiring functional and fitting uniforms and equipment from servicewomen to the SAF as an institution. Examples include integrating sanitary products, a pregnancy uniform, and new underwear into the SAF's logistics machinery. In these particular examples, the design and distribution of the uniform and equipment item in question *might* not, in themselves, contribute to rendering servicewomen perpetual exceptions within a masculine uniform(ed) collective.

Conclusion

This article has examined how the SAF has problematized servicewomen's access to fitting and functional military uniforms and equipment since the 1980s. We distinguish three phases and ways of problematizing 'the uniform issue', which broadly corresponds to three time periods. In the first phase, we showed how 'the uniform issue' primarily was articulated as a problem for servicewomen to be addressed by individual servicewomen. In the second phase, it was framed as a problem for servicewomen to be addressed by the SAF. In contrast, the third phase articulated the SAF as both implicated and responsible for solving 'the uniform issue'.

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While we have shown how women's access to functional and fitting uniforms and equipment has been articulated as different kinds of problems – including a work environment problem, an efficiency problem, and a recruitment problem – we have also shown how 'the uniform issue' continuously, in all three phases, were associated with gender equality. The meaning of gender equality, however, has shifted notably. While gender equality in the first phase appeared to denote the expectation on servicewomen to adapt to the masculine military institution and its material conditions, gender equality in the second phase appeared to signify access to all uniform and equipment systems (including underwear) in the correct sizes and safe designs. Finally, in the third phase, we saw the emergence of a structural problematization where gender equality denoted a gender mainstreamed material acquisition and logistics machinery that does not discriminate against women as a group.

We showed how the third problematization enabled new ways of addressing 'the uniform issue', which not only included acquiring new items or modifying existing ones but also updating the data from which uniforms and gear are designed, altering who provides and initiates the provision of uniforms and to develop routines around items that must be kept in stock. Whether these decided, planned, and in some cases, yet-to-be-imagined solutions will be fully implemented is a question for future research. Future studies also have to pay close attention to if and how efforts to address 'the uniform issue' are resisted by military and civilian actors, for instance, by articulating women's underwear, pregnancy uniforms, or tampons as threats to the masculine military institution and collective. After all, when interviewees responded to our questions about 'why it has taken so long to solve "the uniform issue"?' one answer kept reappearing: 'a fear of change and of losing power' (Interviewee 8) and a feeling that 'the last male bastion is threatened' (Interviewee 5).

Consequently, by shedding light on the changing ways in which 'the uniform issue' has been problematized, this study has contributed to scholarly debates on military gender integration as well as to broader discussions about women's inclusion in male-dominated working life. In contrast to the imagined transformative potential of the military uniform, we show how SAF uniforms and equipment have often differentiated servicewomen (and in some cases men) by revealing or highlighting their difference from the 'standard male' soldiering body. By not providing equipment, providing ill-fitting and non-functional equipment, or expecting women to provide it themselves, servicewomen are marked as exceptions to the uniformed and uniform collective. In any one of these cases, the uniform hinders rather than facilitates servicewomen from being recognized as and carrying out the work of a 'real' soldier or military professional.

Finally, we want to underline that the third phase discussed in the paper represents an interesting shift in discourse, as the provision of adequate uniforms and equipment for servicewomen is articulated as something more, or perhaps something other than a problem. When using recruitment and brand-building campaigns to attract potential women conscripts by reassuring them that their equipment needs will be met, the SAF rearticulates 'the uniform issue' as a solution to, rather than an obstacle for, the recruitment and retention of both servicewomen and societal support. Through these efforts to address 'the uniform issue', the SAF emerges as a gender-equal, gender-conscious, and ultimately progressive organization that arguably can be perceived as an attractive employer and a valuable public institution. By laying bare this transformation in the SAF discourse on uniforms and personal equipment, this article also speaks to broader debates about how military security work is made attractive and legitimate in the Nordic context.

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Notes

[1] The interviews – 11 single interviews and one double-interview, with two military employees – were semi-structured and conducted in Swedish by one or two of the authors, recorded and thereafter transcribed.

[2] Women conscripts were given access to financial support in 2000, when the government added a new paragraph (§ 6) to chapter 4 in the bylaw regulating benefits for conscripts (SFS 1995: 239). Women officers most likely got access to financial support for underwear a few years earlier directly from the SAF and/or local regiments, but we have been unable to identify exactly when. Paragraph 6 regarding women's right to financial compensation for underwear was abrogated in 2017, when the government activated conscription for both men and women.

[3] According to its minutes, the working group predicted patterns to be available in the fall of 1991 (*Försvarsstaben* 1990–1991).