This article discusses women serving on closed bases (where soldiers stay to sleep) in Israel’s Defence Forces (IDF). Based on findings of a large-scale qualitative study, the author suggests that women mimic male soldiers to get round the structural barriers set by the military. This response is linked both to women’s proximity to combat and to the living conditions found on closed bases. These women have created a new approach for ‘doing masculinity’. They mimic male combat behaviour and often stretch the definition of combat to include themselves in it. This is beneficial to women soldiers on an individual level but does little to alter traditional gender roles and may even serve to reinforce them.

A 1990s episode of a popular Israeli television show depicts a young female soldier discussing her violation of uniform code. She tells the viewer that when questioned by a superior officer she explained to him that wearing her hair down may be a breach of army code but does not impact negatively on her ability to fly a plane. Her unbuttoned shirt, she explained to him, does not pose a threat to her operation of a tank and, likewise, when she infiltrates enemy territory, her bright red lipstick, also a uniform violation, is not picked up by enemy radar. The female soldier then recounts for the audience how the officer was an intelligent man and immediately understood the validity of her points. They agreed that when on combat missions she could breach uniform code but that when she works in the office she must have her hair collected in proper fashion so as to not interfere when she ‘blows’ her commanding officer.

Popular representations of Israel’s military suggest that the integration of women into the organisation has created a degree of gender equality in both the military and in Israeli society. This sketch, through its tongue-in-cheek humour, expresses the more complex role of women in the IDF. Indeed, the integration of women into a previously male

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domain does not necessarily create gender equality. The woman in the 

sketch seems to be active in combat—infiltrating enemy territory, driv- 

ing tanks, flying planes. The punch line, of course, reveals the true 

nature of her position, which is clearly less significant than it seems and 

very much subordinate to her male commanding officer. As with other 

scholars interested in women’s participation in the IDF, my research 

deals heavily with the structural barriers faced by female soldiers.

As noted by Sasson-Levy,¹ women soldiers find ways of getting around 

the IDF structural barriers set by mimicking male soldiers. She adds 

that women in masculine army roles may be looked upon as symbols of 

feminist achievement, yet ‘their emphasis is on individual equality and 

meritocracy and not on the general collective change of gender rela-

tions’.² This emphasis on individual equality manifests itself in the imitation of male soldiers. However a deeper analysis of how female soldiers accomplish this mimicry and what consequences this behaviour brings has yet to be carried out.

This paper outlines the apparatus that female soldiers draw upon as 

they mimic male soldiers in a new approach for ‘doing masculinity’.³ In 

essence they are ‘playing at being real soldiers’ — much like the soldier 

in the sketch; they portray themselves as active and important in the 

male military domain while in reality their power in this sphere is mini-

mal, as are their roles. This paper analyses mimicry practices by outlin-

ing how women serving in peripheral positions in Israel’s army attempt, 

through imitation, to capture an element of the prestige, sense of impor-

tance and belonging typically reserved for male combat soldiers. They 

do this by simulating the living conditions associated with combat, par-

ticularly closed base living. Closed bases are bases on which soldiers stay 

to sleep and so differ from open bases in which soldiers return to their 

homes to sleep. Women also mimic by associating themselves with male 

soldiers, with weapons and by danger through proximity to combat. 

This mimicry goes so far that female soldiers often stretch the definition 

of combat to include themselves in it. All of this seems to be beneficial 

to women soldiers on an individual level. It increases their individual 

feelings of pride and their sense that they have truly participated in the 

IDF. However, it does little to alter traditional gender roles in both the 

army and Israeli society, and may even serve to reinforce them.

The IDF as a gendered organisation

Kanter’s theory of proportional representation and tokenism suggests 

that when more women move into a male dominated organisation, the 

treatment of women within that organisation, especially those in token 

positions, will change.⁴ However, thinking beyond this gender-neutral 

relative numbers interpretation, women’s integration into male domi-

nated organisations is increasingly being viewed through the lens of
gendered organisations theory. There is a growing acknowledgement that organisations themselves are not gender neutral but rather that gender ideologies and expectations are embedded in organisations themselves, as well as in the interactions of their members. Indeed, organisational structure and culture are greatly influenced by context, which in turn affects the gendering process. Furthermore, when women and men are physically integrated, functional differentiation leads to a sexual division of labour that is grounded in stereotypes concerning biological sex differences. These stereotypes are supported by various social control mechanisms and allow men to preserve their own privileges within the organisation. As a result women who work within traditionally male settings are filtered into traditionally female jobs within those settings. Indeed, there is often a great deal of sex segregation in jobs and duties within the same occupations. For instance, female managers often lead smaller or less powerful departments than their male counterparts and female clerks often have less prestige and responsibility than male clerks.

The IDF provides an excellent example of this tendency. In recent years the IDF has received a great deal of media coverage worldwide about the integration, promotion, and status of Israeli women. As a result, discussing my research on women in the Israeli military often becomes tiresome. Researchers in this field seem to be cursed with the need to explain, over and over again, that the media image of gender egalitarianism in the IDF is largely a myth. Although most Jewish Israelis serve in the IDF and might appear to share a common army experience, conscription is not universal and the experiences of men and women differ. Married women, pregnant women, mothers, and religious women are automatically exempted from service, resulting in a large discrepancy between numbers of men and women serving in the army. In fact, only 60 per cent of Jewish women are drafted compared to 80 per cent of Jewish men. Moreover, the length of obligatory service is different for men and women. Women are required to serve an army term of 24 months while men serve 36 months. Women do virtually no reserve army duty while men are expected to spend ‘a near life-time of active reserve’. As Uta Klein contends, ‘All in all these aspects of different conscription policies show that what is called ‘universal’ conscription is selective rather than universal, when the female population is concerned’.

Despite the discrepancy in male and female participation rates, the majority of Jewish women in Israel, like the majority of Jewish men, do serve in the IDF. However, this does not necessarily result in uniformity of army experience. The IDF is characterized by an extreme sexual division of labour; women are excluded from most combat positions and are often relegated to clerical or administrative positions. Izraeli points out that even where women hold the prestigious position of combat
instructor, they do not share the same stature as their male counterparts because they lack field experience. ‘What works by the books, the soldiers say, may not work in practice’. She further argues that while assigning instructor positions to women helps to advance the careers of individual women, it also serves to preserve the gendered division of labour already present in the IDF.

The gendered nature of the military

The IDF, like other militaries, is by nature a masculine institution. In fact, as Segal notes, the military may be ‘the most prototypically masculine of all social institutions’. Barrett claims that, ‘militaries around the world have defined the soldier as an embodiment of traditional male sex role behaviours’ and argues that not only is the military a gendered institution, it also helps to create gendered identities. Military culture honours traits traditionally deemed to be masculine: physical strength, force, aggressiveness, etc. These are the traits that are most commonly associated with combat. Morgan writes: ‘Despite far-reaching political, social, and technological changes, the warrior still seems to be a key symbol of masculinity.’ Indeed, women’s participation in the military has often been fraught with obstacles due to anti-female attitudes embedded in military culture. This often leads to feelings of marginalization and even to harassment and abuse.

Enloe argues that allowing women entry into the military core, ‘would throw into confusion all men’s certainty about their male identity and thus about their claim to privilege in the social order’. She continues by explaining how, in order to preserve the present social order, women must be denied access to the front and to combat, which are viewed as the very essence of the military. Thus, not only is masculinity in the military rewarded, it is the primary construct around which socialization into soldiering takes place. In fact, when present, women’s army roles are meant to reinforce masculinity by providing reminders of femininity. For instance, women are viewed by the IDF as ‘civilizing forces’ and are expected to behave as such. Moreover, women provide ‘symbolic touches of home’ and are encouraged to demonstrate their femininity as well as the nurturing aspects of their personalities. This, no doubt, provides the contrast needed to amplify the masculinity of male soldiers while at the same time reminding them of the feminine body for which they are fighting.

One would assume that the presence of women soldiers would somewhat change the masculine nature of the military. However, theories of gendered organisations make clear that institutions such as the military are infused with gender and that a shift in numbers (as suggested by Kanter) does little to alter the masculine construction of the organisation. My research suggests that women on closed bases serve within
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this masculine framework yet fail to become an integral part of the system.

Gendered organisations and gendering processes

Acker’s groundbreaking work moved gender from the realm of the individual by suggesting that organisational structures are gendered. She argues that these structures embody assumptions about gender and gender roles. ‘Abstract jobs and hierarchies.... assume a disembodied and universal worker....[who is] actually a man; men’s bodies, sexuality, and relationships to procreation and paid work are subsumed in the image of the worker...and pervade organisational processes...’. Acker uses this argument to explain why gender segregation is repeatedly reproduced and, in doing so, implies that integration is not a practical tool in lessening gender inequality.

Kanter discusses the experiences of women who have integrated into previously male dominated organisations in terms of tokenism, i.e. the marginal status of workers who are the minority in their workplace. However, she argues that tokenism is a problem of numbers and therefore the experiences of token women should become more positive as more women enter the organisation. This argument stands in opposition to gendered organisation theories. Today, scholars take issue with this gender-neutral analysis and posit that women’s negative experiences are a result of their positions as social, as opposed to numerical, minorities. Thus, work experiences are determined by the status of the minority group in society and not by relative numbers. This may explain why the movement of women into closed bases has done little to change the status of women in the IDF.

In a remarkable work, West and Zimmerman view the military as a gendered institution that creates gendered behaviour, arguing that gender is the product of social interactions. They argue that gender is a ‘situated doing’, not a property of individuals but, rather, ‘a feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society’. In the highly gendered institution of the military, army life and positions provide a great many opportunities to reinforce traditional gender behaviour patterns, and more importantly, to use biology as a means for membership sorting. Gender is, indeed, constructed and sustained through social performances for which the military provides an optimal stage.

Acker points out that simply knowing which gender category one belongs to is not necessarily an adequate guide as to what is appropriate male and female behaviour. Rather, what is acceptable gendered behaviour depends on the structure of the institution one is participating in. While the IDF neatly places female and male soldiers into groups
that adhere to its needs, soldiers actively construct personas that are appropriately gendered for the military institutional setting. As Britton and Logan note: ‘workers themselves may craft their identities in gendered ways through their work.'

This is clear in military adages such as, ‘turning boys into men’. Less clear are notions of the military ‘turning girls into men’ though research indicates that this gendering also takes place. Research on women in both the IDF and the U.S. army has found that women are often placed in a ‘Catch 22’ situation. They are expected to be womanly, but penalized for being overly feminine. They are expected to be masculine yet faced with the stigma of being labelled either a lesbian or ‘not a real woman’ if they are considered to be too masculine. The tension between these two competing gender-demands creates a source of tension for female soldiers.

Female soldiers seem to be torn between doing feminine or masculine gender. As Weinstein and D’Amico, writing about women in the United States’ military, explain:

Each day, the servicewoman must (re)construct her gender identity: Should I try to be ‘one of the guys,’ that is, adopt a passing strategy, hoping for male bonding to extend to include me? Or should I be ‘one of the girls,’ that is, become ultrafeminized, hoping for brotherly affection or chivalric protection? Should I try to be a ‘soldier,’ that is, aim for a seemingly gender-neutral professionalism, hoping for mutual respect? Or should I be a crusader, mounting a conscious — and personally and professionally risky — challenge to the structure of gender relations in the institution?

As previously noted my research, discussed below, suggests that women serving in Israel’s closed bases ‘do gender’ with a twist. They manage to retain the feminine qualities valued by society while attaining a measure of prestige offered by the military structure by stretching definitions of combat and mimicking male soldiers.

**Research methodology**

In 2002, I travelled from my home in Canada to Israel in order to carry out both field research and interviews. By the end of the year I had conducted interviews with sixty-two Jewish-Israeli women. Interviews were semi-structured and conducted in Hebrew. Respondents were asked a series of questions pertaining to their army experiences such as: How did you come to hold your army position? What did you do with your free time at the base? What kind of relationships, if any, did you have with co-workers? Interviewees were also asked to describe their daily activities on the base in detail (from the time they woke up and brushed their teeth to bed time). This technique produced rich data on their thoughts and feelings as soldiers and also worked as a memory aid for interviewees.
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Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 31 and varied greatly in terms of ethnicity with women from many backgrounds: Polish, Romanian, Iraqi, Moroccan, Egyptian, German, Yemenite, Turkish, Russian, Indian, South American. This reflects the Jewish Israeli population and its diversity. Interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes and once completed were transcribed verbatim and translated into English. The data was then coded for analysis into themes such as proximity to combat, tokenism, closed base service, open base service.

The sample was obtained by a snowball technique that built on a number of small snowball groups. I approached both women known to me through family and friends as well as strangers, simply requesting an interview. Often informants referred me to others. Approximately one quarter of respondents were still serving in the IDF at the time of the interview.

Additionally, for two months I conducted field research on six army bases throughout Israel. I did so by volunteering for an IDF program set up for both Israeli citizens and tourists who would like to spend a period working for the army. The program encompasses people from various countries and religious backgrounds (approximately half of the volunteers identified as Jewish and half identified as Christian) and can extend from as little as one week to as long a period as desired. During their participation volunteers eat with soldiers in the dining hall, socialize with soldiers in both the workday and the evening, and sleep in soldiers’ barracks.

My knowledge of Hebrew was especially helpful during fieldwork. While other volunteers were sometimes treated as outsiders, I was often mistaken for a regular soldier. I was invited to chat over refreshments in the offices and to both male and female soldiers’ rooms to smoke water-pipes (which is actually prohibited by the IDF). I often sat with them at mealtimes and drank coffee with them during my breaks.

Throughout my field research I attempted to vary my physical location and my army jobs as much as possible. When I finished my daily, allotted job, I would often seek out other jobs in order to maximize the number of soldiers that I met and the number of work settings that I observed. Through this strategy I was able to participate in many spheres, including kitchen work, sorting and packing medical supplies (for both army and public use), laundry and uniform distribution, bakery work, gas mask inspection, food distribution services (for soldiers serving in the occupied territories), cooking and cleaning.

Often, I found my way into different job settings by talking to soldiers working there and by finding excuses to visit them. I visited the infirmary and went into offices in order to share their snacks or help with volunteer paperwork. I requested tours from soldiers who were pleased to show me their work-stations, including army tanks and guard stations. For all these visits, I identified myself as a volunteer who was
also carrying out research, making clear my role as a researcher. I also informed the IDF of my presence as a researcher/volunteer by means of the IDF branch responsible for foreign volunteers and the sister organisation in Canada through which I had enrolled. Thus, the IDF knew of my presence and, in fact, several officers volunteered to find me respondents. Since my research concentrated mostly on soldiers’ feelings and not on details of their work or on military tactics, I did not require official IDF permission to carry out my research.

The myth of military service

Discussion of the military in Israel and elsewhere brings forth certain images central to army service, most often associated with weapons, borders, and combat. In the IDF, combat roles are among the most esteemed positions and their prestige is subsequently transferable to civilian life. While white-collar military roles are granted high status, the highest status is reserved for soldiers serving in combat units. As E. Levy contends, ‘combat soldiering is not simply another job in the IDF, but is conceived of as a key to entry into the collective. It is the strongest version of the link between army service and national belonging’. However, combat missions play only a small part in IDF operations: only 20 per cent of male soldiers are considered combat soldiers and a mere 2.5 per cent of female soldiers are considered to have combat positions. As most soldiers are not directly linked to combat, the notion that army experience is regularly connected to weapons and fighting is largely a myth. Nevertheless, there is an overwhelming conception in Israeli society that army service is somehow linked to being in direct contact with combat. Just as prestige is connected to combat positions, having had a ‘real’ army experience is connected to having had contact with combat. The closer one’s proximity to combat, the greater the prestige of the position and the more authentic the army experience. As women serving in the IDF serve mostly in peripheral positions, their army experiences are often highly removed from the combat frame.

My research was carried out at the height of the Al-aqsa Intifada, the second Palestinian uprising against Israel’s military and civilian population, during which terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians took place at alarming rates, at times averaging one attack per day. Concurrently, IDF operations in the occupied territories greatly increased. With many deaths and much suffering for those on both sides of the existing conflict, the Intifada created special circumstances for Israeli society and for the IDF and, thus, for my research. The security situation in Israel was heightened and many soldiers who served in non-combat positions were placed in situations where they were expected to perform semi-combat duties. For instance, soldiers whose only experience with weapons was from their few weeks in basic training, often found themselves having
to carry weapons. Soldiers, especially armed soldiers, were expected to represent security and calm, as if their very presence would somehow prevent an attack. Accordingly soldiers, especially male soldiers who did not have positions associated with combat, were thrown into the ‘soldier role,’ magnifying the visibility of masculine military imagery and strengthening the myth that most military service is combat based.

Play soldiering: Combat proximity and living conditions

Closed bases allow women soldiers to live in military space without the interruption of going home to sleep, thus providing a ‘typical’ army life-style. Moreover, the closer the closed base is to combat, the more connected base life is to combat tools (weapons, tanks) and, more importantly, to combat soldiers. In line with the myth of military service, army life is most often envisioned as linked with weapons and war and those serving in bases connected to these things feel that they are undergoing the veritable army experience. Just as combat positions are considered to be the ‘true’ military positions, closed bases are regarded as the ‘true’ military bases, irrespective of the fact that this does not mesh with reality. This is because closed bases often simulate combat conditions in terms of physical conditions and distance from home and because male soldiers are most often posted to closed bases, just as male soldiers monopolize combat positions. Closed bases therefore provide an environment in which women can live the same life-style as combat soldiers. Indeed, what better a way to mimic combat soldiers than living among them and suffering the same physical conditions? Sasson-Levy argues that, by modelling themselves on male combat soldiers, women soldiers reproduce the notion that masculinity is a universal norm for soldiering.\(^{35}\) I would add that by mimicking combat soldiers, women soldiers strengthen the notion that the only ‘real’ soldiers are those involved in combat.

In addition, because combat is considered the most prestigious form of army service and as women are formally barred from most forms of combat duty, women’s prestige is measured by their proximity to combat. As Ben-Ari states, ‘status is dependent on proximity to or distance from the epitome of the serviceman – the combat soldier’.\(^{36}\) Thus, the closer one is to living the myth of military service or to others who are living it, the higher the individual prestige level. As women cannot officially enter most combat units, true combat identity is unreachable. In response women serving on closed bases make themselves members of this high status group and gain a sense of true military participation by modelling their life-style on, and associating with, combat soldiers. Golan points out that, ‘the closer a woman’s task is to an actual combat position, the higher her status, albeit after that of her fellow male soldier’.\(^ {37}\) However, it is important to note that women’s status is not only determined by the
proximity of her military position to a combat position, but by her physical proximity to combat and combat soldiers. While women soldiers’ status may not reach that of their male counterparts in combat, they raise their own status by both mimicking male combat practices and placing themselves near male combat soldiers. Edna Levy found that young people in Israel ranked the desirability of military jobs according to their, ‘actual proximity to the battlefield or...similarity to combat service’. She notes that this was most striking among the young women she studied who are formally banned from direct combat roles. Likewise, Robbins and Ben-Eliezer write: “Combat” for women...is highly connected to serving in the territories; it does not involve fighting or even training. However, the cultural capital and prestige earned from these roles is clearly a case of support for militarism without full participation. Women soldiers, unable to participate fully in the myth of military service, can gain many of the advantages offered from combat by placing themselves nearer to the myth. This seems to be the closest women can come to full participation in the military organisation. Simply put, women soldiers use male combat soldiers as a means of gaining status in an organisation that values combat above all else.

Physical demands and base conditions

Barrett, discussing the construction of hegemonic masculinity within the US Navy, points out that, for some, enduring physical hardship becomes a mark of masculine achievement. Indeed, physical endurance and rough conditions are often associated with ‘real’ soldiering. I found that respondents who served in combat or combat-type positions (such as border guards or combat instructors) were made to go through vigorous basic training and courses as preparation, even though they would never be placed in combat situations where this training would come in useful. Often they reported having been pushed to their physical limits during training through activities that included running with heavy loads, staying awake for long hours, and standing on their feet for long durations in cold weather conditions. They reported feeling that they had been forced to carry out activities that they did not, initially, think they could manage. Carrying out these tasks left them with feelings of great accomplishment. Furthermore, physical activity simulates combat because basic combat training is highly dependent on physical action. If women in closed bases are ‘playing at being real soldiers’, pushing themselves to their physical limits is essential to the game.

Many respondents serving at closed bases experienced unwelcoming physical conditions. Bases were often very cold during the winter, shower and toilet facilities were often unclean, bedrooms were crowded, laundry presented a problem, food was distasteful, and sometimes respondents reported having had insects, rats and mice at their bases. These harsh
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physical conditions (especially at bases close to combat) also served as a source of pride for soldiers. The conditions stand in strong contrast with conditions at open bases. Respondents who served in open bases often reported choosing not to eat any food whatsoever served at the base (due to their dislike of army food) and spoke of their preference for their home’s private, clean shower and their own comfortable bed. These options were not available at a closed base and this contrast was very much a source of pride for my respondents. Moreover, respondents reported that suffering through harsh conditions made them feel like ‘real soldiers’. Of course this is not surprising as rough base conditions resemble those of combat soldiers, while having the luxury of going home from open bases each day presents the epitome of non-combat service.

The contrast between open and closed bases is demonstrated through the term jobnik. This term is pejorative, used to refer to all those who do not serve in combat units. Although in reality this includes the majority of men in the army and, of course, almost all women (which is why the term is seldom used to describe women — women’s non-combat status is a given), it is usually aimed at the lowest status military positions, such as cooks, common guards, drivers. Fisch explains the link between the term jobnik, combat service, and masculinity:

The non-combat male soldier, known as a jobnik, is completely outside this [combat unit] hierarchy and thus unable to access the symbolic capital associated with manhood and combat. Although all women serve in a jobnik position, the term is restricted for men in non-combat units and ultimately infers that their positions are not ‘proper’ roles for a man and interchangeable with the strictly non-combat female roles. Thus through the gradation of status organised around the link between combat and manhood, these roles serve as a [means for determining male and female domains].

Women serving on closed bases seem somewhat removed from the jobnik state as their placements, if not their positions, model combat where status and prestige are derived in part through differentiation from and denigration of non-combat service. Combat soldiers are more highly valued than jobnikes because non-combat positions are regarded as less essential by both the IDF and Jewish Israeli society. Interestingly, while male combat soldiers derive prestige by comparison with non-combat soldiers, women soldiers on closed bases derive prestige not only through their association with male combat soldiers but also in comparison with women serving at open bases. While they are not combat soldiers when compared to their male counterparts, they are more like combat soldiers than their female counterparts on open bases. As Sasson-Levy (2002) explains that by differentiating themselves from women in more traditionally feminine military roles, women construct a positive perception of themselves. She writes:42
Like their male counterparts, the women soldiers in masculine roles identify with the military masculinist ideology and express anti feminine attitudes. Therefore, in order to differentiate themselves from what they perceive as traditional, weak, and submissive femininity, as it is represented by the army, they speak with condescension and distain about other women whom they regard as inferior to men, and they tend to think that most women belong to that category (certainly women soldiers who serve in traditional feminine roles).

Indeed, my respondents on closed bases often spoke of women on open bases as somewhat spoiled or even unmotivated. One respondent articulated this well:

I think that most of the women, there aren’t so many combat women but those that are, are much more mature and not as spoiled as the clerks [at open bases] that worry about their nails...to start crying because: I have a paper cut! Or if I accidentally break a bit of a nail it’s the end of the world.

It is interesting to note that this respondent views combat (and closed bases) and non-combat (open bases) as dichotomous with combat equivalent to maleness and non-combat equivalent to hyper-femaleness (e.g. being upset by a broken nail). Furthermore she speaks of women on closed bases as if they are, themselves, combat soldiers. Another closed base respondent, speaking of her friend (who served in the same position as she did but at an open base) noted:

In short Miriam is stressed...[when she’s not] at home. She can’t not come home. She’s one of those mommy’s girls, wrapped in a ribbon.

Clearly, this respondent equates open-based service with being spoiled—real soldiers, it seems, do not go home to mommy. Since she served in exactly the same position as her friend but in a closed base setting, her comment also served to reinforce her place in the unofficial military hierarchy. She does not go home every day and so her military service resembles that of ‘real’ soldiers serving in combat. By belittling her friend’s base placement, she elevates her own unofficial status in the military organisation.

Most respondents on closed bases had not previously lived apart from their parents. Many spoke of having to ‘fend for themselves’ and directly linked this with both independence and maturity. Given that the army structures its soldiers’ daily routines, it is interesting that army service should provide respondents with such a sense of independence. The army dictates what soldiers should wear, what they should eat, where they sleep, and how they spend their time. Parental rules are replaced with a military structure that regulates behaviour and simultaneously confers a false illusion of independence. Indeed, while military regulations may objectively be regarded as lessening independence, my respondents did
not perceive them in this manner. On the contrary, the fact that the IDF provides structure and rules was viewed as something that soldiers are made to ‘deal with’, and overcoming the difficulty of adjusting to this lifestyle was seen as a step to independence and maturity. Many respondents told me stories of having to overcome both the rules and limitations placed upon them by the IDF. These women often claimed that such trials made them emerge stronger, and sometimes claimed that the army taught them how to stand up for themselves. This is not surprising as strict rules and structure mimic the atmosphere of combat (in its military portrayal if not in its messy reality). One officer commented on this by explaining why she feels that people who have served in the IDF are more mature:

Forgive me for saying this to you but I think that one of the reasons that in Israel people are more mature, smarter, and more open to things than people in other countries is because of the army. Because at eighteen suddenly, without asking you, they disconnect you from the life that you’re used to. And they tell you what to wear, what to eat, how to behave, what to do, and you get a great amount of responsibility.... The army matures.

This soldier links a strictly structured atmosphere with maturity and responsibility in a manner that echoes the rhetoric of ‘the making of men’ yet fails to see the irony in her statement. She explains that soldiers have their every move controlled but, in the same breath, suggests that this very thing leads to responsibility. However, this irony can be explained through examining the myth of military service. The atmosphere of a closed base is linked in soldiers’ minds to ideas surrounding combat regardless of whether or not the base is actually located in a dangerous area or connected to combat positions. The highly structured environment of a closed base feels like combat soldiering to them. The very fact that the soldier must adhere to military rules and regulations implies proximity to combat even if this is not the reality. This concurs with Enloe’s analysis as she explains: ‘In reality, of course, to be a soldier of the state means to be subservient, obedient and almost totally dependent. But that mundane reality is hidden behind a potential myth: to be a soldier means possibly to experience “combat”...’. Living alone for the first time and managing military life places women at closed bases as what Edna Levy calls ‘simulated soldiers’. For the closed-based soldiers in my sample, the life-style associated with closed-base soldiering simulates actual combat positions while being forced to obey stringent rules and regulations becomes a replacement for battle.

_Bending Definitions: Equating Danger and Action with Combat_

One of the greatest sources of pride for soldiers is to serve in an area that is considered dangerous. Most of the women in my sample who served...
in close proximity to combat found themselves in dangerous areas. Many of these women served (as educators, computer technicians, dental assistants, and social workers) in positions that were not directly related to combat yet they considered themselves to be combat soldiers. One most blatant example of this phenomenon comes to light in an interview with two women serving as computer technicians — Miriam, who was serving on an open base, and Orna, who was serving on a closed base close to one of the occupied territories.

Orna: I’m kravit [female combat soldier] and she’s a jobnikit [female form of jobnik].

Miriam: … she’s a jobnikit…she doesn’t understand that she’s a jobnikit just like me.

Orna: I’m krav


Miriam: Because she always thinks that she, she’s in the territories so that’s it. So she’s kravit. And she’s not kravit….I have an exemption from the territories.

Orna: (said in funny voice) She has an exemption from the territories! An exemption from the territories…

Miriam: Why should I go to a dangerous place?

Orna: Nooo

Miriam: There’s no reason for me to go.

Orna: That means that you’re a jobnikit! That you’re a coward!

Interviewer (to Orna): Do you think of yourself as kravit?

Miriam: (laughing) She left her M-16 at home.

Orna: Because of the fact that they shoot at me in the shower. Because of the fact that instead of a window in my office I have concrete, then…it’s considered very dangerous.

Clearly, Orna equates danger with combat. In her view, simply being in close proximity to combat makes her a combat soldier. This sentiment was shared by other respondents One who served in a clerical position at a closed combat base related:

I really, really loved it. It’s like: a soldier, going to the Golan Heights…it’s like I’m kravi.
Indeed, simply being placed in dangerous situations made respondents feel that they were like combat soldiers because they were placing their lives at risk. Several respondents spoke of having to spend long hours in bomb-shelters or secured rooms, which gave them a sense of combat and also served as a bonding mechanism between soldiers. Others spoke of being forbidden to leave their work spaces during dangerous periods. Risking their lives in this way made them feel that they were much like combat soldiers and evoked feelings of pride. They felt that even if they were not themselves fighting, their sacrifice showed a devotion and courage equivalent to that of their male combat counterparts. One respondent explained:

Even if there was shelling or something like that, I would have to — it was forbidden for me to move....everyone would go down to the bomb shelters, we...would stay....Going in, not going in, war; you’re staying to work. So eh, that’s patriotic.

Just as danger was equated with combat, serving at a combat (as opposed for example to a maintenance or a clerical) base was enough to make my respondents feel that they were themselves combat soldiers. It seems that the atmosphere of a combat base, as well as the company of combat soldiers, results in feelings of belonging to combat units as well as feelings of pride. One respondent articulated this well by pointing out that simply belonging to a combat division made her feel the status of the entire group. She explains that in retrospect she realizes that she did not actually serve in combat at all, yet at the time of her service group membership made her feel entitled to group standing.:

Yes [I think of myself as kravi], because I’m serving like...kravi and I’m serving with soldiers that are kravi soldiers.... But why is it pride? Because you feel that — first of all the more that you are in a division, the more that you understand what the contribution of that division is to the IDF...and you basically start to become part of it and the moment that you’re part of it, you develop some sort of pride...[You’re] like bursting from pride! You get to the unit and it’s all the wind [rush] of kravi.... Today it’s really funny to me because really, come on, you know, what is it really? But then, it looked like — you felt it, that you were doing something very important.

Alongside danger, respondents often mentioned what they referred to as ‘action’ as a great source of pride. They regarded simply serving at bases where there was a great deal of combat activity as exciting and it made them feel that they were themselves combat soldiers. For instance, when I asked one respondent what she meant when she used the word, ‘female-fighter’ she answered: ‘someone who’s found in the centre of things.’ She then explained that feeling she was in the centre of things gave her a great deal of confidence and pride. Another respondent, who worked in education, explained that being at the centre of the action
made her feel special. That is, she felt special to be chosen as one of the few girls to be close to the action and she felt that simply by being there she made a greater contribution than she would have at a base far from ‘action’. She said:

Like, it’s pride and it’s fun. And you feel, again, you feel that you’re not merely in the Kirya [a large open base located in TelAviv] and that. You feel that you’re doing something more ‘action’ like that.... But I was one of the few girls who went up there, most of the girls stayed at the base.

Clearly, being near ‘action’ provides a fitting set for the playing at being real soldiers that these women seem to be doing. Indeed, many respondents mentioned that they requested to be in close proximity to combat because they wanted to be close to action. As one respondent who did not have this request fulfilled, and who served in an open base explained:

[I wanted to be combat] because I like action. I like...to be in the field....I like that a great deal. I wanted an army environment. I really liked the idea of the army and to be a fighter. I liked...[that world]. Not the...[world] of contributing.... [That is] more the men I think, but being more part of... [that world]. To really feel the army and not to sit in the office....You understand, the army is somehow adventure service.

What is most interesting in this respondent’s statement is that she fully acknowledges that in a position that she considers to be combat, she would not be contributing in the same manner as combat men, yet she desires to be in the field in order to feel the ‘adventure’ of combat. Other respondents echoed these sentiments and added that being in a location where there is ‘action’ is more fun as it adds an element of excitement to work that is otherwise somewhat monotonous or uninteresting. Additionally, being around action usually overlaps with being in imminent danger, which, as noted, gives women soldiers the feeling that they are risking their lives and are thus, themselves, combat soldiers. One respondent articulated this well when asked why she enjoys serving at a base close to the occupied territories:

Because it’s — it’s like action. It’s fun. Every time you hear [certain] noise you run straight away to see...what’s going on. It’s a risk.....It’s very interesting.... It’s dangerous. I like that it’s dangerous. Because they can shoot at me...it’s not a problem for them....Any second something can happen but still it’s, it’s a risk like that, understand. It’s dangerous to be there and that’s why it’s fun.

Other researchers have also found that women serving in pseudo-combat roles in the IDF find the danger involved in their placements to be exciting. The Israeli media portray these women as enjoying the adventure of combat as well as the action involved in travelling risky routes to and from their bases.45
The notion that danger is considered a source of fun is strongly tied to the game of playing combat. It is striking that the women in my sample who served in dangerous areas spoke only of the excitement involved in the danger and did not mention having had any concerns for their own safety. Also, there is no mention of the fact that this excitement is intricately linked to proximity to conflict, violence, and human tragedy. The fact that these women feel elated by their connection to suffering, death, and war is discouraging regardless of one’s political position on the Israeli-Palestinian or Arab-Israeli conflict. Traditional notions of gender suggest that women are peace minded and that men are war minded. While this thinking has been questioned by military gender scholars it serves to reinforce the military as a masculine domain. Women soldiers enjoy their proximity to war for precisely this reason: considering the great prestige conferred onto combat soldiers, Robbins and Ben-Eliezer note:

During helicopter journeys to and from distant bases in Lebanon, women soldiers on occasion engaged in ‘war games,’ decking themselves in the men’s military gear for the return. The bullet-proof vest became a status symbol; it testified to one’s proximity to battle and the risk of death this unusual assignment entailed.

Danger and action are crucial elements of combat. If women are playing at having real combat positions, the closer their conditions resemble those of combat soldiers, the better players they become; and playing the game well leads to status and prestige.

Creating combat identity through tools and base placement

Connection with the tools and/or the environment of combat, rather than actual involvement in combat activity, seemed to make soldiers feel the pride and status connected with combat soldiers. This point is best illustrated by a discussion with one respondent who explained how simply carrying a weapon confers combat status.

Interviewer: Why are you walking around with a weapon?

Respondent: I don’t know. I got it in basic training and it hasn’t left me, and I’m asked everyday why I have a weapon. I don’t know — they decided that we’re combat and...

Interviewer: What kind of feeling does it give you that they decided that you’re combat?

Respondent: Pride.... Combat is pride.

Just as carrying a weapon is associated with combat and is thus a source of pride, so is serving at a closed base (even one removed from combat). Indeed, simply serving at a closed, as opposed to an open, base
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gave some respondents the feeling of being pseudo-combat soldiers. One respondent (who did not serve anywhere near combat or danger) illustrated this well when she told me:

Once every two months you do weekend service, so it turns out that I'm at the base for a week and a half [without going home]. So I really feel kravit.

Another respondent who did not serve in close proximity to combat but did serve in a closed base shows how serving far from home is also associated with combat, pride, and ‘real’ service.

... not many girls serve far from home. When we were in the base... we'd always say that we are kraviot and all, we're not at all like other girls because we come home once every two weeks like boys and we were really enthused that we were pseudo-kraviot with the going home schedules of kraviot. And also in that most of my female friends would go to the base at eight in the morning and come back at five in the afternoon....I think that my service was much better than theirs.... And I think that in order to have the army experience you really have to be far from home... and to feel that you’re doing army. That is, not to be spoiled and come home everyday. That’s it. So I felt that my service was even better than that of others.

Reinforcing gender roles

One must be cautious when evaluating gender performances. Often, what seems ‘progressive’ in terms of gender equality has counterproductive consequences. For instance, Pilgeram, in her discussion of female farm operators performing masculine roles, suggests that, ‘the women’s performance might actually enforce the idea that all good farmers are men and that the only way to succeed in agriculture is to conform to the requisite standards of hegemonic masculinity’.

Similar arguments have been put forward in relation to women’s participation in Israel’s military. Sasson-Levy in her discussion of women in masculine army roles, notes:

Through mimicry practices, they [women] resist the traditional military definition of women as weak and vulnerable or as sexual objects. In so doing, they challenge the patriarchal order of the military gender regime. On the other hand, mimicry expresses an idealization of, and ingratiation to, the powerful group.

While being in closed bases, especially those in dangerous areas, was a source of pride for my respondents, it also reinforced stereotypical gender roles. The clerical, social work, or other non-combat nature of my respondents’ activity on these bases contrasted strongly with the work done by male combat soldiers around them. That they were not really combat soldiers stood out more clearly at a base close to combat than it would have at any other base. Indeed this juxtaposition only serves to
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reinforce gendered expectations about which jobs men and women are best suited for and to strengthen the gendered nature of the institution. It also served to reinforce the position of women as weaker and in need of protection.

A very blatant expression of this is present in the discussions surrounding the deaths of Sgt. Adi Osman and Sgt. Sarit Shneor. These female soldiers were serving in the territories and were among those killed on October 24, 2003 when their army base in the Gaza Strip settlement of Netzarim was infiltrated and the soldiers’ barracks were fired on. The deaths of Osman and Shneor stirred up a great deal of controversy in Israel not only about the issue of settlements in Israel’s occupied territories but also about arming female soldiers serving in clerical or social work roles in dangerous areas. Both Osman and Shneor had had their weapons taken from them as a result of IDF budget cuts. In fact, after the incident, the IDF began investigating a claim that a base commander took weapons away from all female soldiers serving on that base.

Like Osman and Shneor, many respondents serving in close proximity to combat were not armed. They explained the rationale behind this decision was that in a combat situation their weapons could be taken from them. This left my respondents dependent on the male soldiers at the base. Many reported needing to be escorted from place to place by an armed male or having a group of male soldiers on the base solely to guard them. The fact that their male counterparts were often involved in combat activities seemed to magnify their own non-combat roles at the base. The comments of several respondents suggest that they recognized that they were, in some ways, fooling themselves when they spoke of themselves as combat soldiers. One respondent explained:

In the selections they told us, “combat, combat, combat” but in the end I don’t fight the enemy or something.

Indeed, I encountered several situations where juxtaposing female soldiers to combat and actual combat soldiers evoked some ridicule from the general public. This became especially evident during my field research when I overheard soldiers speaking of female combat instructors as glorified clerks or as somewhat useless to the army. An outstanding example came during a social gathering when one of my respondents explained to a male friend that she had been a combat soldier during her service. Upon learning the nature of her position (which was related to health), her friend broke into laughter at the notion that she would call herself a ‘combat soldier’ when her position had nothing, whatsoever, to do with combat.

Concluding observations: Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery

The notion that women serving in non-combat roles could refer to themselves as combat soldiers simply because of placement on a closed
base may at first seem outlandish. However, it is important to note that the limitations placed on female soldiers are structural and far from hidden. In response, female soldiers create the alternative means of ‘doing masculinity’ to seek status. As detailed above, they use closed-base placement as a means of mimicking male combat soldiers and, thus, find a way to retain their femininity while still gaining from the prestige and status conferred on their male counterparts. However, while the belief that they are like combat soldiers may bring them status and pride, the very fact that this belief is a fallacy prevents their positions on closed bases advancing women’s position generally in the IDF. The old adage that states that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery: the mimicry of male combat soldiers by status-seeking women is just that — flattery. It works as a pat on the back to a system that places serious limitations on the roles of women soldiers and reinforces women’s places in the IDF as peripheral.

Women in the IDF playing at being real soldiers and belonging to the military organisation may bring a sense of self-worth to individuals. Collectively, however, it is as progressive as a children’s game of dress-up and carries much the same result. By ‘pretending’ to be combat soldiers, women in closed bases gain legitimacy and, at least somewhat overcome the structural limitations placed on them by the military organisation. Simultaneously however, mimicking combat soldiers strengthens the myth that the authentic army experience is combat and reinforces gender role differentiation within the IDF. In order to make genuine progress towards gender equality, women soldiers need to move away from imaginary power, exchanging it for genuine combat positions. This will not happen soon as the way that the military is currently legitimized draws heavily on gender metaphors and notions of women as in need of protection. It only goes to reason that, until this changes, women will continue mimicry practices for individual gains and group losses.

This study leaves us with many questions. It would be interesting to see if the few female soldiers who do serve in actual combat positions feel the need to elevate their own status through mimicry of a different nature. It would also be informative to interview male soldiers who serve in peripheral IDF positions to assess whether they too engage in mimicry. If closed-base women engage in mimicry as a result of structured IDF gender limitations, do other groups (e.g. soldiers whose profiles limit their ability to engage in combat, visible minorities, those who deviate from societal gender or sexuality norms, etc.) who face structured, or even unstructured, limitations engage in similar behaviour? Moreover, is there a way that this type of mimicry can be used not only to advance individual status but also to further collective goals?
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NOTES

2 Sasson-Levy, ibid., p.378.
10 Klein, in Note 5 above, p. 672.
11 Izraeli in Note 5 above, p.148.


J. Acker, in Note 2 above, p.139

Kanter, in Note 1 above.


West and Zimmerman, in Note 9 above, p.126.


Britton and Logan, in Note 2 above, p.110.


Non-Jewish Israeli women were not included in my sample as the majority of non-Jewish women do not serve in the military.

Average interview lasted one hour.

Jobs were allocated by the soldiers in charge of the volunteers.


Klein, in Note 5 above; Sasson-Levy, in Note 5 above.

Sasson-Levy, in Note 1 above.

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37 Golan, in Note 6 above, p.582.
38 Levy, in Note 28 above, p.128.
40 Barrett, in Note 11 above.
42 Sasson-Levy, in Note 1 above, p.374.
43 Enloe, in Note 14 above, p.13.
44 Levy, in Note 28 above.
45 Robbins and Ben-Eliezer, in Note 34 above.
47 Robbins and Ben-Eliezer, in Note 34 above, p.325.
49 Sasson-Levy, in Note 1 above, p.376.

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