

Women in 'combat': a revolution in the US military?

 Harriet Gray author pic

Harriet is a second-year PhD candidate at the Gender Institute studying intimate partner abuse in the UK armed forces community. Her research interests include feminist political theory, gender violence, nationalism, militarism, and the gendered construction of citizenship. Follow Harriet on Twitter: @MsHarrietGray

On the 24th January 2013, Chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta signed a directive which will open up 'front-line combat' posts in the US military to women. While this move puts the US military on similar terms to militaries in Germany, Australia and Canada (among others), the British forces continue to officially exclude women from such roles.

As Panetta **admitted**, this move serves to bring the official situation into line with reality. Although defined as 'non-combat', the roles fulfilled by women in recent wars do include those in which they must kill (and risk being killed by) the enemy. Over **150 American women have been killed fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan**. Indeed, as academics such as Cynthia Enloe (1) have long argued, the policy through which women are excluded

from those roles defined as 'combat' has been political and ideological rather than practical. What will be the impact of allowing women into this "last male bastion"(2)?

Will the masculinism of the military and the modern security state identified by academics such as Enloe (3), Young (4), Woodward and Winter (5), and Higate (6) evaporate in the face of a few GI Janes?

This exploration of these issues in this post begins from the assumption that the relationship between the military and gender is complicated, fragmented, and socially constructed and as such cannot be explained by a simple description of the demographics of personnel. I begin by considering some of the discourses which have been used, in both the US and the UK, to argue against the increased incorporation of women into the military. I then use these arguments to think about the ways in which ideas about gender are constructed and used in the pursuit of militarised aims and ideologies, and suggest that perhaps an increasing military role for women is a kind of 'fools' gold' for the political left.

Only a relatively small number of the more influential arguments against women's integration into combat roles centre on women's (in)ability to meet the physical standards required for military action, perhaps because of the likelihood that although most women (and, indeed, most men) would not be able to meet the physical standards set, there would always be some who would. More common, and perhaps more persuasive for many, have been the discourses which focus not on what women can and cannot do, but on an essentialised understanding of what they are.

Some of the most powerful arguments have cited the importance of unit cohesion for operational effectiveness and the disruptive influence that a female presence is assumed to have upon this. The 2010 **Report on the Review of the Exclusion of Women from Ground Close-Combat Roles** relies on such assumptions, as does this statement made by Major General Julian Thompson when the first British woman passed the **Green Beret** training course:

I'm not in favour of women being on the front line... I am sure there are women who are strong enough, but we're talking about cohesion of the unit...Women would be a disruptive influence on the team (7).

Alongside unit cohesion, the main argument against allowing women on the front lines has involved the fear that they might be vulnerable to rape and sexual assault perpetrated by enemy forces. Such concerns are raised in the context of the harsh reality in which **an estimated one in three US service-women experience sexual assault perpetrated by a male colleague while on active service** (a problem which **Dempsey hopes will be improved** by the incorporation of women into combat roles). Despite this, the focus of such objections tends to be on the statistically far less prevalent possibility of rape by enemy captors. In 2007, for example, **Katheleen Parker in The Washington Post** mused:

What kind of man, one shudders to wonder, is willing to allow his country's women to be raped and tortured by men of enemy nations? None that I know, but our military is gradually weaning men off their intuitive inclination to protect women – which, by extrapolation, means ignoring the screams of women being assaulted.

Let's put aside, for the purposes of this short post, the irony of citing the "intuitive inclination to protect women" of the male members of an institution infamous for its prevalence and its **cover-ups** of sexual assault. Let's also put aside the deeply **unethical nature of barring women from a social space in order to protect them from rape**. Instead, it is my view that both the depiction of women as an innately disruptive influence, and the panic over rape specifically committed by 'enemy' men, raises interesting points about the construction of the military as a gendered institution.

Despite the assumptions which underpin such discourses, the connections between masculinity and violence, and between femininity and vulnerability to sexual assault, are neither innate nor inevitable. Similarly, the assumption that the presence of women in combat roles will sever the deep ties between masculine military subjects relies upon essentialist ideas about sex and gender: ideas which suggest that normative constructions of masculinity and femininity are reflections of innate truths about men and women. Such assumptions represent a misunderstanding and oversimplification of the issues at stake.

Theorists such as Young (8), Ivekovic and Mostov (9), and Yuval-Davis (10) have explored the gendered ideological logic of nationalism and of modern security states. They have argued that such ideologies paint the nation itself as passive and feminised, owing submission and obedience at home in return for protection by the masculinised institutions of the state and the military in the face of external threats. Within such a logic, women come to represent and to embody the national lands, culture, and honour.

Cases where women of one nation have been raped by men of another, particularly in wartime, are often understood through discourses of emasculation in which the nation's men are considered shamed by the violence committed against 'their' women (11). Understood thus, such concern to protect 'our' women from rape perpetrated by 'other' men, without equal concern to protect the rights of women raped by their own colleagues, seems to represent a desire to protect a masculinist nationalistic pride more than a genuine concern for women's right to sexual self-definition. Such discourses can be understood to play a role in the construction of militarised, 'protective' masculinity.

Similarly, masculinity has been used in a number of ways by militaries as a powerful recruitment tool, casting the often difficult and disempowering realities of military life as an honour to which 'real' men should aspire (12). The maintenance of 'combat' roles as "the last male bastion" in which a "band of brothers" work together has served to preserve the masculine character of the institution and of the military career (13), and to protect nationalist conceptions of masculine protection of the feminised nation. The continuing power of such discourses in opposition to women's equal participation in the military suggests that the masculinist construction of military institutions continues to hold sway on the public consciousness. That is, the discourses briefly outlined above may not be about 'women in the military' as much as they are about 'men in the military'; about the construction and the normalisation of an appropriately militarised masculinity.

Perhaps a more enlightening question than “why is women’s military service contentious?” would therefore be “why is men’s military service so rarely questioned?” Men are, after all, not naturally cut out for war; the killing of other human beings in this way is neither inevitable nor easy. Men’s willingness and capacity to serve requires the construction of masculinities in particular ways. It requires significant socialisation, training, and in some incidences, force.

I want to question the assumption that increasing female participation in the military should be considered an unproblematic prize by those of us on the left who work for equality and empowerment. The military is not, in my opinion, just another job: is it an institution premised on the forceful domination of ‘others’. In its current form at least, it relies on the enforcement of a particular worldview centred on ‘protection’ and ‘threat’ and shaped by particular configurations of power, disguised by a discourse of inevitability. Do such moves towards ‘diversity’ without the fundamental re-evaluation of that worldview lead to a change in the military itself, or to the increasing normalisation of the military as just another social institution and thus, to the increasing militarisation of society? Is the US military, for example, going to use this apparent act of feminist progress to take seriously rape, abuse and domination within its own ranks, or to further **justify its wars overseas by a discourse of protecting women’s rights, whilst lacking any real commitment to the wellbeing of such women?**

To understand, and therefore to be able to challenge, the role of the military in the contemporary world, it is vital that we question not just women’s incorporation into certain military roles but the whole constitution of militarism itself. Perhaps instead of an unreserved promotion of women’s participation, we should see this as a powerful opportunity to question those deep links between militarism, nationalism, and masculinity which are so often taken for granted.

¹ Enloe, C. H. (2000). *Maneuvers : The International Politics of Militarizing Women’s Lives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, p 223.

² Kovitz, M. (2003). *The Roots of Military Masculinity*. In P. Higate (Ed.), *Military masculinities : identity and the state* (pp. 1-14). Westport, Conn.: Praeger, p 1.

³ Enloe, C. H. (2000). *Maneuvers : The International Politics of Militarizing Women’s Lives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

⁴ Young, I. M. (2003). *The logic of masculinist protection: Reflections on the current security state*. *Signs*, 29(1), 1-25.

⁵ Woodward, R., & Winter, T. (2007). *Sexing the soldier : the politics of gender and the contemporary British Army*. London ; New York: Routledge.

⁶ Higate, P. (Ed.) (2003). *Military masculinities : identity and the state*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger

⁷ Woodward, R., & Winter, T. (2007). *Sexing the soldier : the politics of gender and the contemporary British Army*. London ; New York: Routledge, p 53-55; 89.

⁸ Young, I. M. (2003). *The logic of masculinist protection: Reflections on the current security state*. *Signs*, 29(1), 1-25.

⁹ Ivekovic, R., & Mostov, J. (2002). *From Gender to Nation*. Ravenna, Italy: A Longo Editore.

¹⁰ Yuval-Davis, N. (1997). *Gender and Nation*. Sage Publications, London.

¹¹ Kim, E. H. & Choi, C. (Eds.) *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*. Routledge: New York and London

¹² Hockey, J. (2003) No More Heroes: Masculinity in the Infantry. In P. Higate (Ed.), *Military masculinities : identity and the state* (pp. xi-xv). Westport, Conn.: Praeger, p 15-25.

¹³ Kovitz, M. (2003). The Roots of Military Masculinity. In P. Higate (Ed.), *Military masculinities : identity and the state* (pp. 1-14). Westport, Conn.: Praeger, p 1.

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