Masculinity, Femininity and the Military: Contextualising the Debate on Women in Combat

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This paper endeavours to historically situate the increasing participation of women in western militaries in the twentieth century. The paper begins with a brief historical analysis of the military as it has evolved as a social institution over the last four centuries, illustrating how the formation of states and the rationalisation of violence combined to consolidate male dominance in the organisation and conduct of war. In doing so, it attempts to outline how this development has intersected with dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity. The paper then narrows the focus to developments in the twentieth century, specifically the increasing participation of women in core military activities, and argues that current debates about women in the armed forces, particularly in combat roles, can only be understood in light of these historical developments.

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of movies and literature portraying the behaviour of men in war show how central to our culture are the ideas about masculine virtues that they celebrate. At the same time these cultural ideas about war and masculinity reinforce and give new content to ideas about the roles of men and women. (Thompson 1991, 65)

The association of masculinity with soldiering has historically been one of the most enduring features of the sexual division of labour. In the vast majority of societies, men have been expected to fight, or at least to be prepared to fight, while women have often been barred from such activity. However, it was with the formation of states around the sixteenth century, and the corresponding centralisation of political authority, that this relationship was consolidated (Connell 1990, 535).

It was also around this period that violence was combined with an emphasis on rationality, a process completed by the eighteenth century with the emergence of military science (Foucault 1977, 135). This paper will begin to look at how these developments served to further consolidate male dominance in the organisation and conduct of war.

In the twentieth century, and especially since the Second World War,
the participation of women in all branches of the armed services has increased and has even, to some degree, been normalised. There are many reasons for the increased participation of women in the military. One of the main reasons has been changes in the nature of warfare, specifically technological military developments which have lead to an organisational revolution in the military (Janowitz 1971, 21).

This revolution in the military has led to an increased role in the military for women for two reasons. Firstly, the growing complexity of the military has led to an increased demand for highly skilled “manpower” and the armed forces could no longer categorically exclude all women in their attempt to meet this demand. Secondly, the reconciling of femininity with “non combat,” “support” roles, the growth of which was one of the main outcomes of the revolution in the way militaries were organised, has proven far easier than it has been to reconcile femininity with “combat” roles.

Further, more recently, there has been a change in military purpose from fighting wars to missions that would not be considered military in the traditional sense. Peacekeeping and humanitarian missions have come to occupy a more central position in military doctrine than ever before. If the military continues to sustain this focus on peacekeeping missions, it is anticipated that the role of women may expand. Not only does this change in military doctrine represent a move away from conventional warfare, traditionally conceived of as male territory, but in this new mode communication and personal skills, traditionally regarded as female traits, are increasingly required (Becraft 2000, 9).

The extent and range of women’s involvement in the military varies considerably between countries and services but has generally not extended to the higher echelons of military power or to combat positions. Further, the participation of women in the military has not proceeded without controversy.

This article will present a brief history of the development of the modern military and examine some of the reasons behind the increasing integration of women into certain areas. An integral part of this analysis involves looking at the ways that dominant definitions of masculinity and femininity have been constructed in this process. The current controversial issue of women in combat illustrates how these dominant definitions of masculinity and femininity are currently being constructed.

STATE FORMATION AND THE RATIONALISATION OF VIOLENCE

As Connell (1990, 535) argues, state structures institutionalised the equation between authority and hegemonic masculinity as they became effectively controlled by men and operated with a bias towards heterosexual men’s interests. The centrality of warfare in this development meant that armies became
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a crucial part of the developing state apparatus, which, in turn, yielded resources for enlarged armies. This “extraction–coercion cycle,” the process through which higher taxes were used to purchase larger armies whose coercive leverage allowed the extraction of even higher taxes which paid for more troops in a continuous cycle, meant that war began demanding the involvement and activity of increasing numbers of people. A critical issue for the armed forces then became the acquisition of “manpower.” Poggi, following Weber, argues that the modern state, like religion, has the ability to give meaning to death and in a variety of ways. Through uniforms, parades and public speeches, the state has deployed the imagery of the heroic death in order to encourage young men to die on the battlefield (Poggi 1978, 100). In this way military performance has become an unavoidable issue in the construction of masculinity. It is crucial, of course, not only to understand how war became a confirmation of masculine identity but also how the ideology of femininity was then constructed to support the material and emotional interests of these men.

The acquisition of manpower relied on an elaborate gender ideology and social structure, requiring not only that males could not test their “manliness” unless they served in the military but also that proof of passing this test was supplied, in part, by gratitude expressed by those women who had been protected (Enloe 1983, 211). The images of women, for example, prostitutes, wives, mothers, widows, social workers and nurses, found at the sidelines of the domain of warfare, play an important part in defining the domain and in “symbolically articulating” the social order and its values.

Women who do not fit within this symbolic construction are excluded from official histories or even inserted in a more conventional manner. An example of this is the story of “Molly Pritcher,” a well known folk hero of the American Revolution who was renowned as a heroic camp follower. According to folklore, she loaded and fired field artillery after her gunner husband collapsed from his wounds. However, historical research has uncovered a very different history. “Molly Pritcher” was not one woman, but hundreds, and these women were deliberately organised by George Washington to serve in combat as members of army gun crews. As this example illustrates, while women will often be used by manpower–short commanders, they are commonly used by male historians only within an ideological framework that preserves the privileges that derive from soldiering for men (Enloe 1983, 122).

To analyse the development of military discipline, a crucial process in the rationalisation of the military, Michel Foucault’s theory of the processes involved in the development of a disciplinary society is useful. The beginnings of military discipline can be found in the “classical” age, but as Foucault (1977, 135) outlines, it was not until the eighteenth century that military discipline, like discipline generally, had attained a level at which the extension of power relations, with the exercise of social control over bodies in social space, and a corresponding growth of systematic knowledge, in the form
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The rational organisation of the military began early in the seventeenth century in Protestant countries: the Dutch Republic, England, Sweden, and later, Prussia (Van Doorn 1975, 8–11). Maurice of Nassau, Prince of Orange, set up the first military academy in Europe, whose teachings became standard practice throughout the Continent, leading to the development of a science of war (Van Doorn 1975, 35). Military science then developed as a form of knowledge, not simply as a useful adjunct to power strategies but as a very social product of the technologies of power. Augustin Ehrensvard, one of the first officers in Sweden who received a “modern” military education built on scientific principles, disclosed the new directions that military training and discipline had begun to take:

Arithmeticks, Geometry, Meckanicks &c should be learnt by Demonstrations; so that the Lad always is kept at a habit of considering all Circumstances and accordingly to draw sane Conclusions and Inferences. Hereby, he is turned off from old Women’s tales, Prejudice, Trust in fortuitous Chance, and other effeminate Fancies. (cited in Sunesson 1984, 202)

This quote highlights that the emerging military science, part of a larger scientific revolution, was being constructed as male and explicitly promoted as superior to, and exclusive of, that which was marked as female.

By the eighteenth century, “Arithmeticks, Geometry and Meckanicks &c” had combined with various power techniques in order that male soldiers could become, as Foucault noted:

something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed; posture is gradually corrected; a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it; making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit; in short, one has “got rid of the peasant” and given him “the air of soldier.” (Foucault 1977, 135)

The next section of this paper outlines the content of masculinity and femininity as they appear in the twentieth century and their relationship to the military in the context of increasing female participation in core military roles.

WOMEN AND THE MILITARY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

From the beginning of the twentieth century various women’s organisations, recognising that members of groups excluded from military service can potentially be treated as lesser citizens, have advocated the equal participation of women in the military. However, it is the impact of “manpower” shortages within the military that has had a far greater influence on increasing women’s participation than any of these liberation movements. These shortages are due to the phasing out of conscription as well as a growing reluctance among young people to commit themselves to traditional institutions such as the
military (Smith and McAllister 1991, 371). Also, because the growing administrative complexity of the military organisation and the technological progress in weaponry make high levels of qualification and specialisation increasingly necessary, the armed forces of many countries could no longer afford to exclude women, a highly skilled group within the labour force (Addis et al. 1994, xiii).

The growth of technological and managerial functions in the armed forces has meant a shift in emphasis within the military from the heroic warrior to the military manager and technical specialist. As Durning (1978, 570) points out, this has helped lessen the contradiction between the military and femininity, as it has been historically defined by the military. While there is still some resistance to the notion of women in military roles at all, debate is far more passionate when it comes to the issue of women in actual “combat” roles. As Feld (cited in Smith 2000, 27) outlines, “the combat branches of the armed forces are traditionally the strategic node of conventional stereotypes of masculine superiority” and any intrusion by women into this male domain is heavily resisted. The substance of this resistance will be examined in more detail shortly, after a brief analysis of how the inclusion of females in the military has been negotiated up to this point.

From around the turn of the century, a number of Western countries began to establish auxiliary units such as nursing corps and to employ women in these units, as well as in support roles such as clerical, administrative, transport and communications (Smith 1990, 128). However, it was not until 1941 that significant numbers of women were needed to assume positions in the newly created defence force women’s auxiliaries. In 1940 the Australian government had proposed that women be admitted to the Army, Navy and Air Force. Initially, women were limited to the traditional occupations of cook, clerk, orderly, and signal’s operator. However, Japan’s entry into the war and the obvious usefulness of the early women volunteers resulted in the opening up of more technical jobs such as operating shore defence installations, servicing torpedoes, performing carpentry, and taking aerial photographs. In 1946, with the cessation of the war, these women were returned to civilian life and the women’s services were effectively dismantled (Thomas 1986, 630).

The inherent contradiction between the need to mobilise women as soldiers and the supposed manhood of war was resolved at this time by the notion that female recruitment was only “for the duration.” Even so, the entry of women into traditionally male occupations caused much anxiety within Australian society and the media and the femininity of women service members preoccupied military minds. Consequently, all of the services modified their training to suit the needs of women who, practically speaking, were not considered “real” soldiers. Women considering defence force enlistment were assured, through daily newspaper advertisements and “women’s pages” that they could remain “real women,” with some assistance, of course, from cos-
Popular literature also reflected this uneasy accommodation of women, describing bootcamp and basic training as a process of “transforming women from civilians to Lady Marines” or “women soldiers.” In 1955, for example, a widely-distributed career guidance book by Karl Schuon examines almost exclusively the perceived problem of women in the military. Responding to the need to demonstrate the femininity of women in the armed forces, he points out that women marines were issued “marine greens ... in the form of softly tailored, two pieced suits. They are distinctly feminine and chic ... and black calf pumps and a purse are part of every women marine’s uniform” (cited in Timmons 1992, 23).

It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that the numbers of women in western armed forces began to increase in a significant, long-term way. In Australia, the admission of females alongside male officer cadets began in 1979 when the Navy enrolled women in the same officer training courses as males at HMAS Cresswell, Jervis Bay. The Officer Cadet school, Portsea, which provided a 12–month officer training course, admitted its first females in 1985 and this policy continued when the Portsea course was merged into the Royal Military College, Duntroon in 1987. The opening of the Australian Defence Force Academy was a major step forward in the incorporation of women (Smith 1990, 133).

The first war in which large numbers of women from western liberal democracies served near the frontline was the 1991 Gulf War. While they did not officially occupy “combat” roles, they joined warships sailing into the area, camped with men in the desert and came under fire from Scud missiles (Carter 1996, 101). During this period, the reconciling of women and soldiering was accomplished through an ideology of professionalism, which was made possible by the increasing role technology played. The increasing emphasis on technology was highlighted during the Gulf war where, alongside the familiar masculine rhetoric of “kicking ass,” there was also a fascination with technology conveyed by “the near orgasmic excitement of night time explosions presented on TV screens across the world” (Morgan 1994, 173). In helping to manipulate this technology women were portrayed to be “doing a job” as professionals. Even women reservists and enlisted women, many of whom were not professionals in the sense of intending a military career, were portrayed as “professionals” (Enloe 1994, 99).

The Australian government opened up combat-related roles to women in 1990, and since 1992, 85 percent of all employment categories have been opened to women (Barrie 2000, 4). However, women are still excluded from combat positions almost everywhere in the world. This issue of women in physical combat is one that touches deeply-held views about the role of women in society and the capabilities of women compared with men (Smith 1990, 139).

Some of these views surfaced in 2001 when Australian Defence Force
Chief Chris Barrie, prompted by the recommendations of an internal Department of Defence report, announced that he supported placing women in front-line combat if they met the physical and mental requirements (Grey and Ahmed 2001, 4). Major-General Peter Phillips, national president of the RSL, responded to this idea by outlining his views in an address at the RSL’s national congress in Melbourne on 5 September 2001. He stated that Australia must be “morally bankrupt” to consider using women in its Defence Force for combat duties, adding that women lack the strength, endurance or brutality to engage in the dirty business of war and killing (Cauchi 2001, 2).

The need for physical strength is probably the most common reason given for women’s exclusion from the military generally, and in close combat particularly. General Lewis Hershey, former Selective Service Director, captures this sentiment:

> There is no question but that women could do a lot of things in the military services. So could men in wheelchairs. But you couldn’t expect the services to want a whole company of people in wheelchairs. (cited in Williams 1989, 45)

This argument of major physical differences between men and women is constantly invoked, despite women becoming increasingly stronger and fitter in societies where traditional limitations on female participation in physical exercise or strenuous sports during schooling have diminished or disappeared. Further, ground combat has become increasingly mechanised through the use of automatic weapons, mortars and grenade launchers, making physical strength less relevant (Smith 1990, 130).

That men, particularly young men, are biologically suited to active combat due to their natural aggression is a common argument, illustrated effectively by Cohen who argues that:

> fighting—war—is what the military is all about ... the rest of society is not expected to engage in combat. The rest of society is a place where the natural aggression of young men is a menace; in the army, it’s essential to the job at hand: killing. (cited in Youngman 2000, 20)

Despite the arguments around the issue of women in “combat” continuing as if there was some clear distinction between “combat” and “non-combatant” roles, the reality is somewhat different. The increasing mechanisation of war, as well as the relative decline of hand-to-hand fighting, has meant that the exact definition of combat, a notion which has always had an element of arbitrariness, is becoming increasingly blurred. In fact, Enloe (1989, 130) argues that its definition is deliberately manipulated by military elites in order to define combat narrowly enough so that military planners can recruit and deploy women to fill the perceived gaps in manpower; yet broadly enough to preserve what are imagined to be militarily useful distinctions between men and women.

The Persian Gulf War and Desert Storm/Desert Shield (1990, 2001) should have shattered the myth that combat exclusion laws and resulting policies kept women out of harm’s way (Becraft 2000, 8). Because of new tech-
The passion with which many people in society object to the involvement of women in the military, specifically their involvement in “combat” roles, can only be understood in the context of the historical development of the military and the content of dominant ideologies of masculinity and femininity that have developed alongside the military. It is these historically significant notions that are being expressed when the general virility and the “manhood” of war is invoked. In the words of General Robert H. Barrow, former Commander of US Marines:

War is a man’s work. Biological convergence on the battlefield would not only be dissatisfying in terms of what women could do, but it would be an enormous psychological distraction for the male, who wants to think that he’s fighting for that women somewhere behind, not up there in the same foxhole with him. It tramples the male ego. When you get right down to it, you have to protect the manhood of war (quoted in Zalowski and Enloe 1995, 291).

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have outlined how the formation of states, around the sixteenth century, led to the institutionalisation of hegemonic masculinity. The centrality of warfare in this development required the support of elaborate gender ideologies. Specifically, it required that masculinity become tied up with service in the military and femininity be constructed to support this conception. The linking of masculinity and the military then became increasingly explicit with the growing emphasis on rationality. By the eighteenth century, various power techniques had combined with military science to produce male soldiers.

The analysis of ideologies of masculinity and femininity in this paper then moved to developments within the twentieth century, particularly in the context of the increasing incorporation of women into military roles and widespread controversy surrounding the issue of women in “combat” roles.

The evolution of warfare in the late twentieth century has meant that lines between combat roles and combat support roles have become increasingly blurred. The failure by many commentators to acknowledge this reflects nothing more than a deep social commitment to traditional notions of dominant conceptions of masculinity and femininity as they have pertained to the military.

WORKS CITED


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