

Relationship between gender and war



Critically explore the relationship between gender and war

Gender and war are inextricably linked in many ways, leading it to be a highly complicated relationship, with both components depending on one another and thus developing a cycle between them. To begin to explore the relationship between gender and war it is worth defining both terms in regard to the question. For this essay, we will use the term 'gender' as being separate from the biological sex, focusing more so on how gender covers masculine and feminine roles in their entirety, with 'sex' referring to what is biological, and 'gender' to what is cultural, as we are a certain sex but we learn or perform certain gender roles which are not predetermined or tied rigidly to biological sex. Thus, sex is fixed and based in nature; gender is arbitrary, flexible, and based in culture. (Goldstein, 2001). War itself is violent, sustained, and is between political groups. (Levy and Thompson 2010). In this essay, we will explore how the relationship between the two affect one another, as well as society, leads to them capitalising on one another's stereotypes and creates a toxic environment where fluidity is stunted.

When exploring the relationship between gender and war, we must first look at gender alone, before the war. Looking at the early twentieth century, society's relationship with gender was very strict, which can be seen through the anti-homosexual attitudes, for example the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1885) which conveyed the outlook that gender boundaries were set and that a man could be attracted to only women, and that anything against the normalcy was in fact, illegal. Thus, men were expected to uphold a highly masculine image that contented to the nuclear family. On the other hand,

women were deemed physically weaker, although morally higher, for example a photo card's first line is that a woman has "the right to be a comforter...the right to comfort man on earth" ('Woman's Rights', British Library). This shows that women were viewed as at a man's disposal, with their main purpose being to serve their husband, father and so on. From this we can see that the gender restrictions implemented within society were firmly instilled, which could be seen as one of the causes of war due to it upholding the idea of aggression versus passivity in everyday life.

These gender restrictions have been reinforced and amplified by the occurrence of war, so much so that war has admittedly become a gendered phenomenon. This can be seen in the direct lack of representation within the military, for example within the UK only 10.3% of females are represented in the UK Regular Forces (Defence Statistics, 2017). By maintaining a lack of gender diversity, militaries are able to maintain their association with brutal masculinity. This allows war to contribute to gender stereotypes, when recruitment campaigns could be put in place to improve this. This lack of diversity can also be seen through film, where portrayals of warfare in popular culture have similar undertones of masculine aggression and feminine pacifism. For example, 'Rambo: First Blood' (1982) who is shown to be overtly masculine portrayed through his anger, his strong physique and his role as a saviour. This is interesting, especially when comparing it to the portrayal of women in war, for example 'Zero Dark Thirty' (2012). In this, the character Maya is portrayed as careless for her insistence on military strength, even though several of her male counterparts suggest the same, although they are given no reaction. Here Maya is being portrayed similarly

to Rambo, yet the former receives negative feedback due to her gender and the latter is praised. This leads to the question as to why men and women are placed on opposite sides of the spectrum within war roles. General Robert H. Barrow stated, “ women’s participation in conflict would be an enormous psychological distraction for the male, who wants to think that he’s fighting for that woman somewhere ...it tramples male ego...you’ve got to protect the manliness of war” (Turner, 1998, p. 117) Therefore, we see that that war uses gender to further ignite passion for war. For example, Katherine Hepburn’s first major role in ‘ The Warrior’s Husband’ (1933) where she “ first bared her lovely legs” (Kleinbaum 1983, cited in Goldstein 2001) rather than acted in her first major role as a warrior. As well as this, when Tomb Raider (1996) was released, of the 25, 000 sites that mention Lara Croft (as of 1999) over half contained the term “ nude” as opposed to the action or graphics of the game, as unfortunately her appearance seemed more geared towards male viewers. From this we can see that the narrative that war generates makes it difficult for women to be taken seriously in combat, even in a console game.

Furthermore, war utilises gender as a weapon through both female and male exploitation. Firstly, women are highly abused during war periods, due to them being seen as weak and those manifesting wars use this to their advantage through rape, prostitution and spread of diseases. However, despite women having participated in combat in almost every war, they are often associated with being ‘ safe’ and at home looking after the family, waiting for her male soldier counterpart to return home, as well as acting as an inspiration for him. (Jones 1997) As well as this, the overwhelming

majority of spouses in the military are heterosexual females, thus creating a supposed link with femininity and civilian life. (Enloe, 2000: 182-183) Women acting as spouses are used as symbols of national pride and inspiration, and are believed to be safe from the troubles of war. However, this is far from correct, as war has no geographical boundaries, especially if we take into account the impact that war has ranging from diseases, veteran domestic violence and developing a new role as a widow or single parent – therefore women are never really ‘ safe’ from the devastation of war. Even though there are fewer women that die in combat, this does not mean they go unharmed, instead women die more often of indirect causes after the conflict is over and “ often experience violence, forced pregnancy, abduction and sexual abuse and slavery. There are a large number of findings that convey the horrific ordeals that women have to go through as a result of war, for example “ more than 20, 000 Muslim women were raped during the war in Bosnia,” (UNICEF, n. d.) and at least 250, 000, perhaps as many as 500, 000 women were systematically raped during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda” (IRIN 2008, cited in Shepherd 2014: 161) The abuse of the female body links to the idea that being feminine is inadequate in a war environment, as bodies of both men and women are used by war to ‘ feminize’ the enemy (e. g.) male-to-male rape in former Yugoslavia (Alison 2007). Their bodies, deliberately infected with HIV/AIDS or carrying a child conceived in rape, has been used as envelopes to send messages to the perceived “ enemy”. (Rehn and Sirleaf, 2002) This mass abuse upon women has further contributed to war’s overly masculine agenda, which leads us to wonder what an army led by women would look like – only evidence for this is mythical Amazonians. They represent a foreign, topsy turvy world, representing women in a way

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reinforced by men's construction of their own patriarchal societies as orderly and natural. We can see here that war uses gender at the latter's own expense, which leads to detrimental effects on both men and women, and because the only evidence we have against this is mythical, this is all they know and this cycle is bound to repeat itself, therefore the relationship between gender and war is arguably a dangerous one.

Now we will shift the focus onto how war uses the fragility of masculinity to its advantage, so much to the extent that it becomes toxic. In our current societal climate, masculinity is defined as a physically strong man that provides for his family, fights for his country, and suppresses his emotions – of which all of these traits are amplified the environment of war, those who do not follow these attributes are publicly shamed. This link between masculinity and role of the soldier contributes to lack of representation of women in the military, as if women were more active in combat and seen as their own person, it would undermine one of the major motivations for men to undergo service as a soldier. Boys are rewarded for aggression and women aren't, instead they are socialized to be dependent and passive. Recruitment campaigns, both official and unofficial, also highlight the undesirability of so-called feminine behaviour in men. During World War I, women were still handing out white feathers of cowardice to men who did not participate, even as the suffragette movement became increasingly involved with pacifism (Steans, 2013, p102). More recently, men who refused to participate in India's Gujarat massacres of 2002 were branded as "wearing bangles" (Cockburn, 2010, p 106) suggesting that men who did not partake were essentially women, as jewellery is only socially accepted if

women wear it. Masculinity is also reiterated through military training, with military traditions including group hazing, notorious in the US Marines, and boot camps, where terms such as ‘ lady’ are used to demean soldiers, all of these techniques are implemented in order to toughen up soldiers and establish a firm line between them and any form of emasculation. This links to the argument that men are not naturally violent – “ if masculinity in the raw were sufficient, there would be little need for the sweat, blisters and humiliation of basic training” (Enloe 1993) – men are not predisposed to violence, armed forces really train people to override people’s natural aversion to killing, evidence of this is in World War II, where soldiers were known to have fired away from the enemy showing they are not naturally violent. Therefore, the war environment here arguably shapes the idea of gender and what a ‘ real’ man equates to.

Furthermore, masculinity has been attributed to warfare as women have been increasingly visible as peace activists as part of their demands for greater equality, for example in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft advocated equal rights, stressing that women should not involve themselves in organised violence and war. Virginia Woolf also rejected war because it represented a form of oppression, similar to that of male’s oppression over women. A more recent example is the Women in Black network which uses a push for global peace as a means to overcome socio-economic barriers between women of different nationalities, and the awarding of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize to Tawakkul Karmen, Leymah Gbowee and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf for advocating women’s rights to full participation in the peace process (Steans, 2013: 96). As women here are seen to disassociate themselves with war, men who do

not align with a soldier's attributes are led to be branded as women. This proves that war infuriates the gender stereotype, as it infuriates the traits assigned to each gender to the extent that they are used as insults against one another, which is arguably a war within itself.

So far, we can see that the relationship between gender and war is clearly linked and reliant on one another. However, there are two recent changes to the perception of gender that alter the idea of masculinity meaning aggression and femininity meaning pacifism. The first of these is the rise in female suicide bombers. Prior to the War on Terror, female insurgents were placed into western archetypes of a female warrior, known as wronged wives and mothers that were forced out of their domesticity by desperation, which deprived them of nationalistic or political agency, something that Daniel Berkowitz noted did not happen to their male counterparts (Steans, 2013, p111-112). However, recent scholarship has shifted towards viewing female bombers as not necessarily having gendered motivations but sharing the same grievances as male bombers, such as that of religion.

The second point against the basic dichotomised link is the gradual opening up of openly homosexual individuals in the Armed Forces, specifically in North America and Europe. It is also worth noting the recent repeal of the Don't Ask Don't Tell policy of the US military, which shattered the public perception of soldiers being overly masculine in nature, the idea that strong men can be homosexual began to challenge deeply implemented stereotypes. The arguments that homosexuals would disrupt other servicemen had been considered extremely weak in academic circles for a long time, as homosexuals were definitely serving in the military without

causing any issues, whether they were open about their sexuality or not (Enloe, 2000: 16). By allowing sexual minorities to be open about their identity and still serve their country challenged the traditional notions regarding masculinity and femininity within war.

Unfortunately, while these new developments are encouraging in that they challenge a narrow narrative, the fact that they are such recent changes means that they have not had a strong impact on how gender and the war system are seen to affect each other worldwide.

We must also note the science behind the relationship between gender and war. In regard to biology, males and females are inherently different, with men having to be aggressive and warlike in order to survive the evolutionary process. (Darwin, 1872) We can also look at Zur and Morrison (1989) discussing Gillian (1982) and Chodorow (1978) examining socialization between males and females. They discuss how they are generally less inclined than men to support military intervention. a woman's moral concerns are defined in terms of interpersonal relationships, due to their greater sense of connections and empathy which makes them less likely to endorse torture and so on. Females develop a more fluid sense of boundaries and they tend to be concerned with interrelatedness of human beings and studies suggest women fear isolation and men fear intimacy (Gillian 1982). On the other hand, boys develop a normal male identification with the father and disengage with the mother, and are therefore concerned with boundaries. Testosterone makes men more violent, men are physically more imposing than women. However, women are more likely to endorse war when the lives of children, or their friends and family are in jeopardy as they

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are more drawn to the cohesiveness of community. However, this small difference between genders enough to justify the strict allocation of war-related roles along gender lines? Therefore, this suggest men and women perceive aspects of war differently because of complementary sets of emotional and moral concerns. It is not whether men are more or less powerful not how men and women differ in their personality structures and thus in their attitudes toward war and vulnerability to war propaganda.

In conclusion, it can be said that the masculine aggression and feminine pacifism nexus has become integral to the war system, just as how the war system further instils this nexus upon gender stereotypes within society. The relationship between gender and war is a dangerous one that has led to the exploitation of both males and females, and as of present the relationship has not improved. The only exception to this would be the allowance of a more open sexuality within military, of which arguably is not entirely effective due to the longstanding climate of anti-homosexuality within the military that is undoubtedly hard to break because of its long-standing association with the war system. Today we see gender being discussed as more fluid, especially in the viewpoint of postmodern feminists, who argue that gender should be fluid and individualistic to the person who attributes to it. Perhaps this idea will venture on and develop into a viable solution that would break the unhealthy relationship between gender and war, as currently the cycle of interdependence between them both has led to a lack of change within the military and a constant mistreatment of people across the world.

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