Birthing on the Front Line: A Tale of Military Femininity

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ROBERTA GUERRINA, SEP 26 2012

The news that a British soldier gave birth at Camp Bastion last week was reported with shock in most of the national and international media. Lead stories focused on the surprising, unbelievable and even inappropriate nature of the event. As a scholar of gender and international politics, I found the reaction of the media interesting as it feeds into ongoing debates about the role of women in the armed forces, the nature of gender roles and the presumed incompatibility of soldiering and mothering.

This news story provides a useful starting point for a detailed discussion about the role and position of women in the military that is sensitive to the role of gender ideologies in shaping social norms about war and front-line combat. A number of feminist scholars have sought to unpack the relationship between masculinity and the military. They have long argued that military institutions have been constructed around a particular form of masculinity that focuses on aggression and power. This is what is often understood as military masculinity. Women's role as peace makers and life bearers is thus constructed in opposition to that of the soldier/combatant. Femininity and women are therefore excluded from this essentially male and masculine institution.

The increased number of women in the military undeniably signifies a shift in policy. However current debates focusing on women's contributions to war efforts only serve to consolidate the dominant position of military masculinities within the institution. Focusing on women's difference and women's ability to contribute to strategic military objectives, they fail to challenge the very nature of the armed forces and militarism more widely.

News of a British soldier giving birth on the "frontline" therefore forces us to confront a number of core assumptions about the nature of soldiering and warfare. What seems to baffle most commentators is the need to reconcile the image of the soldier, as life taker, with that of the mother, as life giver. The story is shaped by difficult questions about the position of *pregnant bodies* – women – in armed conflict and state institutions. The role of the armed forces as an employer – therefore concerned with all matters of Health and Safety – is also being brought to bear on future decisions to allow the military to exert higher levels of control on the bodies of female soldiers due for deployment.

The coverage provides details of the birth and the mother's position in the armed forces. The style of the reports is invasive and insensitive. Details about the procedures "normally carried out" in field hospitals are used to illustrate the exceptional nature of the event. Although the MoD dismissed calls for introducing mandatory pregnancy tests, the media's emphasis on controlling military women's bodies – and sexuality – as a practical solution to the "problem" highlights the disciplining nature of the emerging narrative.

The way the story is being reported across media outlets thus represents an attempt to make sense of how this particular event can be made to fit dominant discourses of masculinity, femininity, militarism and mothering. It reinforces the belief that mothering and soldiering are incompatible, despite all the evidence to the contrary that the soldier concerned had carried out her duties right up to the birth. This is not to say that the MoD does not have a duty of care towards the mother and child, or that of any other personnel. It is, however, a useful insight into social attitudes about women in the armed forces. Far from challenging dominant gender discourse on the female soldier, the emerging narrative and debate reinforces the exceptionality of female military narratives.

The normative underpinnings of this story are also evident in the key themes covered by the reports. Firstly, pregnancy is repeatedly portrayed as a medical condition. It is worth noting at this point that under national employment law pregnancy is set out as a "protected characteristic" not to be equated with illness. Yet it should be unsurprising that the military – the most masculine of all state institutions – should seek to frame pregnancy/maternity using what is often deemed to be the only suitable male comparator, illness. This approach to the story, and pregnancy more widely, dismisses thirty years of scholarship that has sought to understand the interaction between the biological and the social entrenched within the experience of pregnancy. Secondly, femininity is brought into question when the reports focus on the soldier's surprise at the fact that she was in labour. The logic of the dominant gender order is based upon the assumption that mothering and life giving provide women a direct – and inescapable – link to biology. This story can therefore only be reconciled by challenging the "heroine's" subjectivity and femininity.

This story is a useful illustration of why women in the armed forces are the subject of much debate. The "character/s" at the centre of this story are not portrayed as "heroines", but rather private actions are scrutinised in detail. More worryingly, they are often portrayed as lacking a voice and agency. As scholars of gender, we need to ask why a counter narrative or discourse has yet to emerge. My view is that women's position in such masculine institutions not only challenges the dominant norms of the institution and militarism, it also helps to unravel the dominant gender order within wider society. It forces us to consider how power permeates all levels of society, therefore challenging the biases (and power structures) that underpin the story as currently told.

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