

Women on the Front Line and Other Equality Matters

Written by Roberta Guerrina and Laura Chappell

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ROBERTA GUERRINA AND LAURA CHAPPELL, FEB 26 2013

On 25th January we both attended the recording of BBC Radio 4's Any Questions at the University of Surrey. The final question sparked a lively debate about the role and position of women in society and the armed forces. The question was simple – “Should the UK follow the US’ example and allow women to take up close combat roles?”; it was also topical, given the recent announcement by the US to allow women to participate in close combat. The question was meant to instigate debate, but the nature and scope of some of the responses warrants further exploration. The discussion that ensued reflects the diversity of public opinions on this issue. These ranged from support for women to take up such roles to traditionalist arguments that women’s position in society should be to promote ‘peace’ and ‘caring’. Charles Moore, political editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, in particular felt very strongly that allowing women to engage in close combat would undermine society’s core values and would lead to the break up of the social fabric.

To be honest, the level and quality of the discussion was somewhat disappointing, not least because it was based on hegemonic views of masculinity and femininity. This discussion is normative in nature as it touches upon individuals’ core values. Clearly, the two sides of the debate represent contrasting positions about the role of women in society. In this context, the military magnifies the issue as it is an institution built upon a very narrow view of masculinity. The difficulty of breaking away from traditional gender values was evident in the answers of the panel.

Two views expressed during the debate caught our attention. Firstly, Cordelia Meyer argued that women should be able to fight on the front line, but should also be able to opt out. This argument underlines the difficulty many people have in imagining women in front line combat roles, i.e. those roles that are traditionally associated with military masculinity. This reflects two interrelated issues: the performative nature of the armed forces in supporting the hegemonic gender order and the failure of the collective imaginary to visualise and articulate an alternative. The second position presented, was more concerning and surprising. Charles Moore openly argued that women should not and must not engage in combat as their role in society is to promote peace, caring and support the (traditional) family. Quite frankly, we and the rest of the audience were quite shocked by this response.

Our surprise was even greater at his open attack on the equality agenda in his recent editorial piece: ‘This equality obsession is mad, bad and very dangerous’. This immoderate attack on ‘equality’ is undoubtedly regressive, but should not be dismissed as it is indicative of a wider trend undermining hard won women and minority rights. His argument ranged from the need to protect women’s caring nature by preventing them from fighting on the front line to the impact of gay marriage on the moral core of society. It seems unbelievable that in 21st century Britain someone would question the social benefits of equality as a principle. Like a “good husband and father” Moore seeks to discipline unruly feminists and gay rights activists by pointing to the dangers inherent in a radical reform of social hierarchies. From this position, those working to secure equality of opportunities are akin to disobedient children who have to be protected from themselves.

Moore’s view is based on a paternalistic perspective of the role of the husband and the heteronormative role of the state as a disciplining force. In his world the UK will collapse if women are not there to support traditional institutions – preferably blessed by marriage vows. What transpires is that fighting for their country is not part of this role.

There is no clear physical or psychological reason as to why women should not be able to perform combat roles on

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the front line. New and innovative work is being carried out at the moment looking at the position of women in the armed forces. The focus of this work is on the challenge the female combatant poses to traditional assumptions about military masculinity. At the core of this research programme is a critique of the argument that women's presence on the front line would negatively impact operational effectiveness. The argument often made is that male soldiers would instinctively feel a responsibility for the protection of their female colleagues. What is often missing in this debate is the voice of women in the armed forces. This is perhaps the single greatest silence in this debate. Women's contributions to war efforts have often been sidelined and understudied. The assumption that women have only recently taken up combat roles is predicated on a very narrow view of combatants. It also fails to consider the changing nature of conflict and warfare.

We should not underestimate the conservative culture of the military. As an arm of the state and bastion of hegemonic masculinity, it is representative of wider social hierarchies. At the same time change sometimes has to be fostered on an institution. The idea that society will collapse if women fail to represent all that is peaceful does not stand up to empirical scrutiny as evidenced by female leaders such as Angela Merkel or Hilary Clinton. Equality is empowering to both genders – to women to take up roles based on individual merit rather than biology and to men who wish to spend more time with their children at home. It is a win-win situation – not a zero sum game in which women's progress is made at men's expense. It is a duty to challenge dominant norms and push for change because inequality is in nobody's interest.

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