

Feminism and the Current Debates on Women in Combat

Written by Saskia Stachowitsch

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SASKIA STACHOWITSCH, FEB 19 2013

The US Department of Defense is lifting its ban on women in direct ground-combat positions, as recently announced by then-Defense Secretary Leon Panetta. The armed services are thus preparing to open the remaining jobs still off-limits to the female workforce. In this context, gender scholars working on military and security issues can expect to be confronted with the question – usually posed by journalists – whether this is a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ thing in terms of feminist and pacifist commitments. This article aims to provide a more comprehensive perspective on the interrelations between the military and gender; one that more accurately reflects the state of gender scholarship on the military and feminist IR. These fields have moved beyond the strict dualism between radical anti-militarist positions which oppose women’s military participation out of pacifist reasons, and ‘integrationist’ positions which unambiguously favour it, sometimes with patriotic overtones.

Introduction

The 214,098 US military women serving in the armed forces today make up 14.6 percent of all military personnel. As frequently forgotten in current debates, they and their predecessors have had access to combat positions for decades, for example as pilots and on combat ships. Bans on these occupations were lifted, along with the ‘risk rule’, which had kept women out of ground combat support units, in the early 1990s by the Clinton administration. Besides, the conditions of modern warfare have ensured that military women regularly participate in situations which anyone not too concerned with legalistic interpretations would consider to be ‘combat’. The blurring of frontlines in the age of counterinsurgency warfare has often been referenced as an important background, even though it is unclear whether the gendered separation between front and rear was ever as fixed, as military strategists and historians would have us believe.

Nevertheless, remaining barriers on participation in ground-combat units below the brigade level have until now excluded women from combatant status largely in Infantry, Armor, and Special Forces units and thereby limited their career prospects. Exclusions have also been linked to the high levels of sexual abuse and harassment of women within the ranks because they contribute to women not being perceived as equals.

Military Gender Integration and Gender Ideologies

The driving forces behind women’s military integration are complex and manifold, and vary according to social, political, and economic contexts. However, some patterns can be observed cross-culturally and historically (Segal 1995; Iskra et al. 2002): Women’s integration has been promoted by changing military personnel needs in the course of professionalization, diversification, and, ultimately, ‘civilization’ of military work fields. In the United States and many other Western nations, this led to the abolishment of conscription and the establishment of all-volunteer forces. These modernized militaries featured a greater need for qualified specialists which could not be filled by the male workforce alone. On the supply side, women’s integration was aided by transformations of the civilian economy which led to their increased labour market participation. In short, in the second half of the 20th century women were increasingly needed to support large, standing, professional forces and they became better qualified for military jobs with a growing civilian component because of their participation in the workforce and rising levels of education.

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However, in the US context, the strong connection between personnel needs and equality in the services meant that integration policies remained selective. Upheld exclusions functioned to limit women to those jobs for which not enough qualified personnel were available, namely support jobs on middle and lower ranks. Jobs in high demand, particularly in ground combat, but also in leadership, were protected from female competition. These patterns of inclusion and exclusion were sustained by a diversifying spectrum of military gender ideologies: Images of military women as gender-neutral professionals promoted inclusion into specialized work fields, while images of women as weak, mentally unfit, 'beautiful souls' in need of protection, or sexualized intruders into the male domain justified exclusion from others (Stachowitsch 2012a, 2012b).

A purely functional approach to military gender integration in terms of personnel needs is however problematic for various reasons:

1) The exact timing and specific contents of integration measures can only be explained out of political contexts: Congressional power relations, the relationship between political and military leaderships, as well as broader socio-political environments define when and how integration is promoted and with what effects.

2) Military personnel demands might be a basic condition, but it was the relentless lobbying of women's rights groups and activists which ensured that integration was not only advanced for the military's benefit, but also that it served the interests of military women and improved their position within the institution.

3) International contexts are influential as well (Stachowitsch 2012c): In the post-Cold War era, foreign policy doctrines began to prominently feature women's rights as an objective and the protection of women from violence as a rationale for military interventions. Militarized international institutions, such as NATO or the UN Security Council, have constructed a link between gender violence and international security. A prominent example is UNSC Resolution 1325 which calls for mainstreaming gender into every aspect of UN missions in order to avoid human rights abuses and sexualized violence in peacekeeping and post-conflict reconstruction.

It is this third level of context that has raised particularly tricky questions for feminists about the adaptations of feminist knowledge for the purposes of powerful military institutions. These foreign policy contexts have to be addressed when evaluating recent developments in the US military:

US Foreign Policy and Gender

The United States' new geopolitical position after the Cold War fostered self-representations as a role model for emancipation and women's rights (Niva 1998). While this narrative was already relevant during the Persian Gulf War, arguments for women's integration in the 1990s still mainly focused on performance, gender-neutral standards, and professionalism. It was the Bush administration which put the narrative of 'liberating oppressed women' in Muslim-majority societies (Sjoberg and Gentry 2008) centre stage to legitimize the pre-emptive military interventions of the 'war on terror'. In this context, women's rights abroad were linked to women's roles in the US military and both to success/failure in the war. Pro-integration arguments began to differ greatly from those of the 1990s, as they claimed that traditional concepts of femininity could be utilized for strategic gains, e.g. by showcasing female soldiers as non-threatening and peaceful to win 'hearts and minds' of the civilian population. The conceptual elements of Bush's strategic vision were underscored by portraying military women as proof of US superiority over the backwards, misogynist enemy.

The Obama administration's foreign policy concepts reformed the context in which military gender integration is taking place. Increased practical difficulties with upholding combat exclusions were finally acknowledged. The repeal of the 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy gave an early indication that inner-military gender relations were to be transformed as well. While the most problematic gender ideologies associated with the 'war on terror' have been removed from military doctrines, feminist optimism has remained cautious. The systematic inclusion of women into efforts to improve contact with the civilian population and gather intelligence on the ground, e.g. in so-called Female Engagement Teams, builds on gender stereotypes which are not all that different from previous approaches. 'Population-centric' counterinsurgency theory still views women as advantageous and uses them instrumentally for

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strategic purposes (Dyvik 2012). Military gender integration is also still implicated with representations of women as peace-makers and proof of US 'cultural sensitivity'. Thus, gender equality and the empowerment of women remain causally linked to American national security interests.

Feminist Critiques of Discourses on Gender and Security

Feminist analysis has shown that such framings can in fact be detrimental to broader equality issues. Feminist scholars have found that linking gender and security in a simplified way is productive of a particular gender order which essentializes women's status as weak victims and claims that they have universally shared peaceful interests (Shepherd 2008). Furthermore, these discourses follow a post-colonial script which depends on constructions of the 'violent other' and associates women's equality with Western civilization, thus 'obscuring "Western" agency in both male privilege and violence against women' (Harrington 2011, 567).

These critiques have also been applied to gender mainstreaming mechanisms in international institutions. Critical research in this area has shown that the gains women make in these institutions always produce both empowerment and new constraints (Prügl 2011, 73). Additionally, some women, particularly white, educated women have benefitted more from the growing institutional attention to gender issues than others. Expectations that women's integration would make militarized institutions more peaceful and geared towards the needs of marginalized groups have thus become increasingly dubious. Hence, uncritically participating in celebrations of women's new opportunities in the military could have unintended consequences.[i]

Challenges Remain

These findings have made feminist positioning on military gender integration ever more complex. The times when standpoints could easily be separated along the lines of equality ethicists (Stiehm 1989) and peace ethicists (Ruddick 1982) are definitely over. But this is not all bad news. Acknowledging these complexities takes the pressure off to exclusively identify with either side. Feminist theory and practice, as a pluralist project, certainly has room for both and feminists will continue to do both, critically engage with military institutions and support equality for women within them.

Feminist disagreements over these issues will go on and likely never be settled. Meanwhile, a rights-based approach might still be the safest bet for those wishing to make a non-militaristic point for military gender integration. While some may not perceive the 'right' to fight, kill, and die as a desirable objective, focusing on equal access to important state institutions is preferable to arguments that women can fulfil placatory functions in the military or provide the social skills that men lack. Women should not be required to prove that they can do anything 'better' than men or bring any specific qualities to military and other institutions to be allowed to participate.

In conclusion, there is no easy, straightforward answer to journalists' questions about the normative evaluation of women's integration into ground-combat. In the light of feminist research in the areas of military, war, security, foreign policy, and international institutions, we can only conclude that full integration does not need to be 'good' for it to be right.

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[i] It is against this backdrop, that Cynthia Enloe (2013) has criticized public debate on lifted combat exclusions as a

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'militarization of women's liberation'.

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