

# Does Gender Shape the War System and Vice Versa?

Written by Ibtisam Ahmed

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IBTISAM AHMED, NOV 16 2014

The quote being discussed is from Joshua Goldstein's book *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa*. The book takes the premise of the quotation as hard fact, a view that is shared in most academic work that covers this topic. This is not to say that the notion of the war system and gender influencing each other is simply a foregone conclusion. Goldstein himself uses a range of empirical evidence combined with both feminist and international relations theories to bring his point across. While not all other authors have a similar approach, Goldstein's justifications can be used in the cases that do not offer their own.

This essay will attempt to see whether Goldstein's assertion can be corroborated with other readings. It will try to do so by first considering what Goldstein says in his work and then analysing different parts of the war system with what he proposes. These analyses will cover the numerical make-up of armed forces, the perception of combatants and peace activists, sexual violence, military training, war rhetoric, and portrayals of war in popular culture and literature. Due to the overlap of some areas[1], these divisions are not definitive, nor will they necessarily be approached in the order provided. Sexual violence and military training will both be covered completely within the discussion of perceptions of combatants (the most detailed section), but are still being pointed out here as they form a significant portion of the argument. Nonetheless, it is important to note what the basic points of discussion are intended to be.

Prior to going into a detailed examination of these topics, it is worthwhile considering what is meant by "gender" and "war system". Goldstein's definitions serve as a good starting point. Unlike some other feminist theorists, he does not use "gender" as the socio-cultural opposite to the biological "sex". Instead, it is used to cover masculine and feminine roles and bodies in their biological and cultural entirety, including structures, dynamics, roles and scripts (Goldstein, 2001: 2). While not explicitly stated, this is the same broad approach taken by other feminist scholars of the war system, such as Jill Steans (2013), Cynthia Enloe (2000) and Miranda H. Allison (2009).

Similarly, his definition of the "war system" does not include a perquisite role for the state or a minimum number of casualties. Instead, it is used to signify the interrelated way in which society organises itself for both potential and actual wars. He notes that violence on a large and organised scale, such as gang violence, can be included in an examination of the "war system", a different approach to most security and military scholars (Goldstein, 2001: 2-3). This subjective view of warfare is shared by other feminist scholars as well, like Allison, who points out that some groups might consider violence an act of war while others might not; for instance, the IRA viewed the Troubles as war while successive British governments did not. The consensus is that concerted acts of violence on a significant scale should be considered as part of the war system (Allison, 2009: 4). Nonetheless, the majority of the scholarship still concerns itself with what is traditionally considered warfare. The broader definition simply means that other areas of organised violence can also be scrutinised using the same viewpoints. Therefore, Goldstein's definitions of "gender" and "war system" are the best ones to use, especially as other scholars have a similar approach.

Having established what the terminology means, it is a good idea to take a more in-depth look at what Goldstein means when he says that gender and the war system shape each other. The crux of his argument is that there is a universal dichotomisation of the masculine aggressor against the feminine peacemaker. It should be noted that the consideration is between masculine and feminine rather than male and female, although a lot of the times this nuance cannot be appreciated due to the simplification of the two sides into hegemonic "men" and "women" groups.[2] This reductive dichotomy exists despite the changing and varied approaches to both war and gender as separate socio-

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political elements (Goldstein, 2001: 3-4).

There are some reasons behind this two-pronged division continuing to hold firm. On a basic biological level, men are different from women and these differences impact the approach to the role of gender in the war system. The biological reasons can be summed up in the following list: (a) men are genetically programmed towards violence, (b) testosterone makes men more violent, (c) men are physically more imposing than women, (d) men's brains are programmed towards long-distance mobility and aggression, and (e) women are adapted for caregiving roles that preclude participation in warfare (Goldstein, 2001: 5). These differences do not take nuances of the gender groups into consideration, but serve as a good starting point when examining the realities of military practices.

The gendering of warfare also has socio-political validations that can be summarised as follows: (a) "male bonding" is important to conduct of war, (b) heterosexual men operate better than women and homosexual men in hierarchies, (c) heterosexual men see intergroup relations, as between two sides of a war, differently from women and homosexual men, and (d) childhood gender segregation leads to segregation in combat forces (Goldstein, 2001: 5). The last point in particular has strong empirical evidence to back it up. It should be pointed out that the assumptions regarding (heterosexual) male behaviour may not be universal or even correct, but they are considered to be true by society at large and are therefore the means by which the continuing gender roles in warfare are still justified.

Goldstein further argues that constructed masculinity acts as a motivation for soldiers across cultures. Norms include: (a) war as a "test of manhood", (b) masculine war roles balanced by feminine war roles such as mothers, wives and sweethearts, and (c) women's roles in actively opposing war, thus furthering the notion of war as masculine and peace as feminine (Goldstein, 2001: 5-6). As a result of these, the presence of women or even feminised men in combat forces nullifies the normative aspects of warfare.

It is interesting to note that areas in which gender roles are highly dichotomised between masculine and feminine rather than being more detailed and nuanced all have links to the war system. Specifically, political leadership (not political participation), hunting as a socio-economic activity and specific coming-of-age rituals that include some form of violent behaviour always show a clear distinction between masculine aggressors and feminine pacifists. The connection between war and gender is arguably the most consistent gender issue across cultures and this is a result of traits being equated with masculinity being constantly portrayed as aggressive, thus making these characteristics more appealing in the war system, where the dominance of the masculine again reinforces the notion of the feminine as being passive (Goldstein, 2001: 7-9).

Given this highly-charged and pervasive gendering of the war system, it is surprising to note that feminist scholarship regarding the role of gender in politics and international relations has, until recently, been lacking. The primary focus of these academic studies has been the prejudices against heterosexual women in the military rather than on how and why gender and the war system feed into each other. Liberal feminists point to the lack of difference between men and women in capability, making the male bias of the military a discriminatory practice. Difference feminists acknowledge that men and women are biologically different and instead focus on the devaluing of feminine qualities in the war system, rather than of women directly. Postmodern feminists take it a step further and argue that gender and gender roles are normally fluid so considerations made on the assumption of "masculine" and "feminine" are inadequate ways of examining the war system (Goldstein, 2001: 39-50).

Although their focus continues to be on the prejudicial nature of gendering the war system, these feminist strands are still vital foundational approaches when considering the cyclical nature of gender and war. Indeed, while none of the scholarship – or the examinations that follow in this essay – are explicitly in favour of any of these schools of thought, they still make use of them. For instance, an examination of the discriminatory practice of only women being allowed to carry umbrellas in the US Marine Corps because men need to be "tough" highlights the difference feminist argument against demeaning the feminine (Enloe, 2000: 262). Similarly, any consideration of women breaking the stereotype of only being victims of sexual violence by being perpetrators, even against men, would fit into the notion of the fluid and evolving gender roles of postmodern feminism (Hale, 2010: 106-108; Steans, 2013: 106-107). Hence, it is useful to have a working understanding of different feminist thought before continuing with the main argument of the essay.

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The essay will now move on to examining different elements of the war system and, in doing so, attempt to see how each element ties in to the male/aggressive and female/passive nexus. The first of these is the numerical make-up of the armed forces, the feature that is the most obviously divided along this dichotomy. In terms of official state militaries, combatants are overwhelmingly male. With the exception of specific individual examples of female fighters, like Joan of Arc and the Rani of Jhansi, there have only ever been two notable examples of substantial and sustained female involvement in warfare. These are the famed Amazonian Corps of the Dahomey Kingdom and the 800,000 female soldiers of the Soviet World War II effort (Goldstein, 2001: 21-22).

Prior to the twentieth century, male exclusivity was a reflection of the general patriarchal nature of global society and the lack of rights for women. This is part of the reason why females in the military are so rare in Islamic Republics, where the strict religious and social expectations that regulate women's behaviour also prevent them from serving in the armed forces. The same justification cannot be given for the global West, where the military remains one of the few areas of life where sexism and misogyny are institutionalised. This continued incidence of primarily, if not exclusively, male combatants can be linked with the cultural constructivism of the masculine as aggressive. To be masculine meant to take up the role of the protector (Allison, 2009: 92; Hunt, 2010: 117). This association resulted in the creation of a cycle, where the obvious majority of male combatants reinforced the stereotype that men are better suited to warfare, thus making more men than women enlist.

In non-official fighting forces, the number of men is still higher than women. Terrorist organisations make use of female suicide bombers in highly visible missions and, similar to Dahomey, they usually participate in groups that are all-female. However, numerically, they still represent a very small number of actual combatants (Stears, 2013: 110). Similarly, organised warfare between drug cartels or organised gang violence is also overwhelmingly skewed towards more male combatants (Goldstein, 2001: 3). While perceptions regarding men and women in the military might be more dynamic, the numerical make-up of the military is heavily male-dominated. This then feeds back into the cycle that was pointed out at the end of the previous paragraph. The number of non-heterosexual men (and women) is harder to determine due to the lack of openness that is available in most standing armies and almost all unofficial fighting forces (Enloe, 2000: 14). However, in terms of simple sex rather than sexual orientation and identity, the war system is a male-dominated sphere.

Having established the gendered implications of the numerical make-up of armed forces, the next step is to understand how these men and women are perceived. Simply put, the male/aggressive and female/passive nexus is the cornerstone of this feature of the war system. Warfare is generally seen as an act of licensed misogyny, where the various sides attempt to dominate the others into submission (Goldstein, 2001: 6). Combatants, regardless of their sex, are commonly associated with masculinity. Similarly, peace activists are associated with femininity.

The link between combatants and masculine behaviour is often emphasised through the actions of female combatants. Women who are involved in warfare, whether direct combatants like Joan of Arc or leaders like Elizabeth I and Margaret Thatcher, are considered to be acting "as men would" rather than acting without any gendered agency involved. Hillary Clinton's hawkish tendencies in the Situation Room during the killing of Osama bin Laden were likened to male toughness as opposed to genderless rationale. A similar notion of masculinity is also given to female perpetrators of war crimes and wartime sexual violence (Hale, 2010: 112; Maciejczak, 2013). Indeed, wartime rape is often justified as being a natural outlet of masculine aggression in times of extreme conflict and chaos. The stress on it being masculine aggression remains constant, even in cases of women being the perpetrators or men being the victims (Kelly, 2010: 120-122).

A particularly striking case of how perceptions of masculinity and femininity are key to the war system is the behaviour of Lynndie England in the Abu Ghraib prisoner scandal. England was one of a group of soldiers stationed at the military prison who physically and emotionally tortured the inmates, going beyond the usual interrogation techniques (Morris, 2008). Her involvement was heavily scrutinised as she was the only woman who participated in the abuse.

From the outset, her behaviour was singled out for more detailed examination. Her role in the abuse broke the established view in the media that women are passive participants or victims in warfare, with scholars such as Laura

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Sjoberg and Caron Gentry using her as an example to challenge established stereotypes (Steans, 2013: 109). Here was a high profile case of a woman acting against the norms. Unfortunately, instead of eliminating or at least diversifying the limited masculine versus feminine debate, she was instead used to reassert the notion of masculinity due to the nature of her offense, specifically that she forced male inmates to strip naked and masturbate in front of her. Tactically, this was meant to humiliate the prisoners by forcing them into private (and culturally abhorrent) behaviour in public. England's participation added further humiliation as she was a woman (Morris, 2008).

Consequently, the result on how England was perceived was that she became masculinised, which, in turn, emphasised the notion that masculinity was a prerequisite to being a combatant. Although her specific actions were condemned, the general idea of a female soldier becoming less feminine was accepted as being a good thing (Horn, 2010: 61-62). The fact that she was doing it within a patriarchal chain of command reasserted this point of view (Steans, 2013: 109). In many ways, her individual agency – which she claimed was a key factor in her behaviour (Morris, 2008) – was ignored and she was reduced to being viewed as an unusual female as opposed to an individual with genderless motives. By contrast, Jessica Lynch, a female pilot suffering from severe post-traumatic stress during the Iraq War, was denigrated for needing to be rescued by her male counterparts, something which male sufferers of military trauma did not go through (Steans, 2013: 149). Her “failure” was seen as a form of emasculation, while England's “success”, although controversial, was seen as a reaffirmation of male superiority.

The perception that being weak is a feminine trait has been repeated throughout history. Sun Tzu's work included a section on the need to discipline female harems for warfare by beating their natural weakness out of them, while Thucydides wrote about male civilians needing to be killed because they were a potential risk but the women were not (Goldstein, 2001: 54-55). The coverage of Saddam Hussein's capture included a detailed look at him crawling out of a “spider hole”, with an emphasis on the emasculating undertones (Horn, 2010: 61), an emphasis that was repeated with Muammar Gaddafi's death.

Recruitment campaigns, both official and unofficial, also highlight the undesirability of so-called feminine behaviour. 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: 102; Cockburn, 2010: 106). When women were employed for factory work during World War II, recruitment posters showed extremely masculine and muscular women saving the nation. More recently, men who refused to participate in India's Gujarat massacres of 2002 were branded by their female counterparts as “wearing bangles” (Cockburn, 2010: 106). In all cases, the notion of masculinity being good for warfare was highlighted and, in terms of recruitment, this was successful in shaming men into fighting.

Masculinity is also reiterated through military training. Military traditions include group hazing, notorious in the US Marines, and boot camps, both of which are designed to harden soldiers against emasculation. Sara Ruddick and Raewyn Connell's works on gender and security note that men, despite their inherent diversity, are programmed into becoming the same soldier through misogynistic military training practices, labels such as “ladies” for rookies and “real men” for post-training soldiers, and the exclusion of openly homosexual male soldiers from the military in the majority of the world (Steans, 2013: 103). In doing so, any trait of an individual soldier that does not tie in with notions of masculinity is repressed, thus creating the assumption outside of the military that combatants are automatically masculine.

Part of the reason why masculinity has become increasingly linked with warfare is that women have been increasingly visible as peace activists as part of their demands for greater equality. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft advocated equal rights but stressed that women should not become involved in organised violence and war. Virginia Woolf rejected war because it represented a form of oppression, similar to male oppression over women. A similar vein was taken by pacifist suffragettes, anti-nuclear proliferation groups and anti-Vietnam groups (Goldstein, 2001: 44). Recent active examples are 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).

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The continued presence of women in the peace process further stresses the dichotomy of masculine/aggressive against feminine/passive. Academics have pointed out how women in active military roles are treated as unfeminine and anomalous. Particularly worrying in this respect is the fact that post-World War II, social expectations regarding gender roles have changed drastically, yet the fundamental passivity of women has gone unchallenged, making the perceptions of gender in the war system static (Alison, 2009: 90). Female IR scholars have also noted that norms associated with masculinity, such as aggression, strength and single leadership, are prized over norms associated with femininity, such as diplomacy/peace, cooperation and unwillingness to fight, in times of warfare. This is enhanced by the hegemonic masculinity wherein the vast majority if not the entirety of the military leadership, as well as the vast majority of the armed forces, are male. Therefore, the image of the masculine as the combatant is rooted in the public conscious (Via, 2010: 43).

Perceptions of femininity in the war system are also highlighted by the social role of military spouses. The overwhelming majority of spouses in the military are heterosexual females – as the overwhelming majority of married servicemen are heterosexual males – thus creating a supposed link with femininity and civilian life (Enloe, 2000: 182-183). Spouses are often used as symbols of national pride by being model citizens, raising their children, taking them to and from school, and lending their vocal support to the current administration. This gendered element is particularly noticeable in that men who are military spouses, whether in a homosexual or heterosexual relationship, are expected to behave in the same way (Horn, 2010: 63). Military sweethearts and mothers play a similar role, though the former is less publicised in conservative states.

There are two recent changes to gender perception that make the use of the masculine/aggressive and feminine/passive nexus less stable. The first of these is the increasing prevalence of female suicide bombers. Prior to the War on Terror, female insurgents during the Algerian War and the Sri Lankan civil war continued to be boxed into the prescribed western archetypes of warrior women. They gradually also became known as wronged mothers or wives, forced out of the domestic sphere out of desperation, but still being specifically feminine. This deprived them of nationalistic or political agency, something that Daniel Berkowitz noted did not happen to their male counterparts (Steans, 2013: 111-112). However, recent scholarship and official security documentation have shifted towards viewing female bombers as not having gendered motivations but sharing the same grievances as male bombers. In fact, the main point of contention when regarding suicide bombers of either sex, as noted by Claudia Brunner, is not of gender but of religion, with the stereotypical view of Islamist terrorists creating an environment of endorsed racism but not necessarily of endorsed sexism or misogyny (Steans, 2013: 113).

The second point against the basic dichotomised nexus is the gradual opening up, in North America and Europe primarily, of openly homosexual individuals being able to serve in the armed forces. Particularly noteworthy is the recent repeal of the Don't Ask Don't Tell policy of the US military, which broke the public perception of combatants being overly masculine in nature. 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). However, by allowing sexual minorities to be open about their identity and still serve meant that traditional notions regarding masculinity and femininity were being broken down. Heterosexual males were automatically masculine, but a homosexual male could be physically imposing (masculine) while being emotionally complex (female), creating a paradox that could not be consolidated with traditional views (Goffard, 2013).

Unfortunately, while these new developments are encouraging in that they challenge a narrow viewpoint and attempt to make it more complex, their relative freshness means that they have not had a strong impact on how gender and the war system are seen to affect each other worldwide. This is all the more so because of the specific geo-political limits of the two issues at hand; female suicide bombers are largely restricted to the Middle East and parts of the Russian Caucasus, while openly homosexual combatants are restricted to specific parts of North America and Europe.

The features of the war system that have been discussed so far, namely the numerical make-up of belligerent forces, perceptions of masculine combatants and feminine pacifists, sexual violence, and military training (both as part of the discussion on perceptions), are ones that are highly visible. It is therefore important to note that elements of the

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system that are not as explicit also have gendered implications. In order to expand on this, the essay will now move on to an examination of war rhetoric and portrayals of war in popular culture.

Rhetoric regarding warfare, particularly in the political sphere, is heavily reliant on pre-constructed social expectations. By glorifying warfare using the existing masculine/aggressive norm, rhetoric feeds back into the war system (Peterson, 2010: 21). The gendered aspect can take the form of either direct references to the importance of protecting others, with an emphasis on the masculine nature of protection, or through the more subtle frequency of phallic representations and toned-down misogyny. In the case of the former, warmongering nations will be quick to paint their opponents as oppressive, drawing parallels between them and sexual assailants. Nations that need to be protected are often said to be “raped” and pillaged like “innocent, helpless women”, thus identifying the protecting nation as male, or at least masculine. The gendered aspect of protectionist rhetoric can seep into more direct references to men and women as well. For instance, George W. Bush singled out women as one of the groups that needed protection in the Middle East when justifying the War on Terror, with all other groups that he referred to being gender neutral although implicitly feminised due to their need for protection (Hunt, 2010: 117).

In the case of the latter, that is, the rhetoric surrounding masculine representations of war, scholars have pointed out that weaponry is often subconsciously phallic in nature, from spears in early warfare to nuclear missiles now. Even if the shape can be warranted due to aerodynamics and weapons design, the language surrounding nuclear weapons is heavily sexualised. Initially it was about being “bigger”, in terms of the size of both the weapon and the overall stockpile. Casual references to the Cold War pointed out the USA and USSR as the “big daddies” of the war with the powerful arsenals at their disposal. Contemporary references to weaponry, with a shift away from size and in favour of stealth, still have an undercurrent of sexual activity, with words like “discharge” and “muscle” being commonly used (Goldstein, 2001: 44-45). During research for her article “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals”, Carol Cahn stated that this constant use of phallic symbolism and misogynistic comments could be traced to a realist assumption of total anarchy in the global system, especially in the absence of a strong, masculine guardian (Steans, 2013: 105).

Portrayals of warfare in popular culture have similar undertones of masculine aggression and feminine pacifism. Serving in the military is seen as a chance to be part of a “brotherhood”, a notion reinforced with such famous titles as *Band of Brothers* (Robinson, et al., 2001). Even modern depictions of warfare, where female figures in the war system are not unusual, there is a constant emphasis on masculinity. Scenes of army life in *Lone Survivor* include the hazing of a young new recruit by making him perform an effeminate dance, constant references to female paramours and the importance of (heterosexual) male bonding (Berg, 2014). Male bonding is in fact common across portrayals of multiple wars, such as Iraq in *The Hurt Locker* (Bigelow, 2008), the Gulf War in *Jarhead* (Mendes, 2005) and Kashmir in *Border* (Dutta, 1997), which also included portrayals of military widows. It is interesting to note that the female director of *The Hurt Locker* commented on the masculine nature of warfare in the DVD interviews, specifically about the reservation some quarters of the US military had about letting a woman helm the project (Bigelow, 2008).

On the other end of the spectrum, women who are involved in the war system are either portrayed as lacking due to their femininity or abnormal due to their (masculinised) rationality. In *The West Wing*, CJ Craig is often portrayed as being naïve and idealistic because of her insistence on holding on to the feminine cause, while Nancy McNally has to visibly suppress her femininity as part of her role as military advisor (Sorkin, 1999). In *The Iron Lady*, Margaret Thatcher is shown to be unusually aggressive for a woman, despite the fact that other male world leaders were equally eager to go to war (Lloyd, 2011). *Zero Dark Thirty*'s Maya is considered reckless for her insistence on military strength, although several of her male counterparts get away with suggesting the same (Bigelow, 2013). Even in the fictional universe of *The Hunger Games*, where teenaged girls and boys are forced to fight together, Katniss Everdeen's skill with the bow and arrow is considered secondary to her importance as a feminine symbol of oppression (Collins, 2010: 83-85) while Peeta Mellark's ability to be a male pacifist is commented on as being unusual (Collins, 2008: 157-158).

With regards to portrayals of homosexuals and soldiers affected by warfare, the general role is one of emasculation. In *Downton Abbey*, homosexual Thomas is confined to being a nurse – although by his own plan – while heterosexual William and Matthew fight in the trenches (Fellowes, 2011). Generally speaking, homosexual combatants are not

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usually portrayed on screen or on the page. *The Best Years of Our Lives* and *The Men* both portray disabled male war veterans whose rehabilitation includes the sacrifice of the women in their lives into subordination. In other words, the only way for the emasculated male to become whole again, he must find a way to be better than the empowered female (Michel, 1993: 262-263, 269-272). In terms of anti-war sentiment, disabled soldiers need to have a placating feminine presence in their lives in order to subdue their natural aggression in favour of pacifism, as in the case of *Coming Home* (Michel, 1993: 272-273). Otherwise, they run the risk of losing their agency as an emasculated aggressive male has no function in the war system, as seen in *Born on the Fourth of July* (Michel, 1993: 275).

Therefore, it can be reasonably said that the masculine/aggressive and feminine/passive nexus has also become a staple of the parts of the war system that are not directly associated with the act of warfare. Combined with the earlier examinations of the numerical make-up of the military, the perceptions of combatants and pacifists, sexual violence, and military training, it can be seen that this nexus is at the heart of the interactions between gender and the war system. Due to the historical prevalence of male combatants, it has become accepted that masculinity is aggressive and femininity is passive. This feeds into how the gendered aspects of the war system are further shaped, which, in turn, further informs how the nexus is seen.

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[1] For instance, perceptions of combatants might partially be covered in the make-up of armed forces.

[2] Although this distinction has been pointed out, the essay still makes multiple references to just "men" or "males" and "women" or "females" instead of the more complex "masculine" and "feminine". This is primarily because a lot of the considerations regarding actual military practice involve the basic biological distinction rather than its more complicated counterpart.

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## About the author:

**Ibtisam Ahmed** is a Doctoral Researcher at the School of Politics and IR at the University of Nottingham. His research is a decolonial killjoy which critically evaluates the toxic ways that British colonialism conceptualised itself as a utopian civilising mission, with the aim of shifting the focus towards anti-colonial and local narratives. He is heavily involved with queer activism on both a professional and personal level.