



Discuss the issues regarding sex and gender in the military. In your discussion, take into account the following questions: are the female soldiers as good and competent as male soldiers in the military? Is it more 'natural' for men than women to do front line fighting – why or why not? (2000 words)

Traditionally, military roles and combat have been considered the exclusive domain of males, particularly in western societies. Women have only recently been allowed into the military and, in the majority of armies, are still not allowed to participate in front-line fighting. Gender differentiation in the military can be considered from two perspectives: sociobiological or cultural explanations. These two points of view will be used to examine whether women have the biological and emotional attributes required to be competent soldiers; and whether culture and society, inside and outside the military, provide the best opportunities for women to be competent soldiers. I argue that it is not more 'natural' for men to do frontline fighting, since women do have the capability to be competent soldiers. I find that it is actually cultural gender roles and stereotypes – inside and outside the military – that currently restrict their capacity to be effective as they could be. Further, I suggest that the very malleability of gender roles could offer a way out of this predicament.

When considering why males and females are potentially better or worse at particular behaviours like frontline fighting, one approach that can be used is sociobiological analysis. Sociobiologists hold that gender differences in social behaviour or cognitive function are due to the different adaptive problems that men and women have encountered during evolution (Moghaddam 1998, pp. 408-410). Because men were typically hunters or warriors, they had to adapt and develop attributes that would assist in this task, such as spatial rotation, quantitative problem solving and aggression. Women were characteristically mothers, gatherers or traders, so they therefore developed better verbal ability and became more nurturing (Moghaddam 1998, pp. 408-410). Researchers such as Best and Williams (1993, p. 238) point to cross cultural similarities of these behaviours as evidence for a biological basis of such differences.

Women's inability to perform due to physical or cognitive capability is often used as another sociobiological reason to exclude women from traditional male domains such as the military, despite a lack of supporting evidence. For example, behavioural differences are cited as reasons from the military or given as excuses for women's physically inferior performance: "Military women are less aggressive, less daring, less likely to suppress minor personal hurts..." (Mitchell 1989, p. 6). The sociobiological approach has also been used to try and link emotional experiences with adaptive problems, that is, women have different emotional reactions to problems than men (Moghaddam 1998, p. 409). It is claimed, for example, that women are more distressed over emotional rather than sexual fidelity (Moghaddam 1998, p. 409). Yet, cross-cultural studies do not support this claim when cultures with different values concerning love, marriage and sex are considered (Moghaddam 1998, p. 409). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that since the problems men and women face in the military are the same or similar, they will have the same response to these problems (Moghaddam 1998, p. 408). Thus, sociobiological reasoning that excludes women's participation in the military is unlikely to hold up, since evidence shows that behavioural differences have more to do with culture than gender, and, regardless of gender, similar issues are often responded to in similar ways.




Further problematising the sociobiological view, there is evidence to suggest that women are able to perform in traditionally male fields, and that these objections therefore do not originate in a concern for ability. In the former Soviet Union armed forces, where women undertook hard physical labour in the workforce, they were capable of the acts of physical strength required in combat (Hancock 2002). Many case studies undertaken in America were unable to reveal any crucial differences in male and female soldiers' abilities to perform the duties required (Williams 1989, pp. 50-60). Also, a recent Canadian study highlighted that the issue of insufficient upper body strength in women conceals male opposition based on self-interest, taboos and prejudice rather than ability (Hancock 2002). Therefore, there is evidence to support that women's ability to perform in military settings is not a question of innate physical characteristics.

Moreover, historical evidence supports the idea that both men and women share the capacity to display physical and emotional attributes. Examples of women as warriors or in combat are not as numerous as men, but they do exist. The women warriors of Dahomy were recognised as a superior



military unit during the 18th and 19th centuries (Edgerton 2000, p. 3); almost one million Russian women volunteered to fight during the second world war (Edgerton 2000, p. 142); and the Israeli women fought in Israel's War of Independence in 1947-49 (Edgerton 2000, p. 142). It is also recognised that women are as capable of expressing anger and aggression as men (Unger and Crawford 1992, p. 178). However, aggression is sensitive to social sanction - the rules say it is inappropriate for women to express aggression (Richardson, Bernstein & Taylor 1979 cited in Unger and Crawford 1992, p. 178). Since sociobiological approaches do not thereby explain all gender differences and behaviour, there is a need to focus on the impact of culture and socialisation on gender differences and a female's ability to perform in the military.

Having highlighted weaknesses in the sociobiological argument that women are not as competent as men in the military, we must now scrutinise the cultural reasons and stereotypes that contribute to the common view that women are not 'natural' frontline fighters. Studies have proposed that culture and socialisation are the main sources of gender differences and that behaviour is shaped through socialisation processes to match gender roles (Moghaddam 1998, p. 411). Gender is developed and explained by the different experiences of men and women in the course of their lives (Moghaddam 1998, p. 441) or, more simply, gender is constructed and maintained by social interactions (Kessler and McKenna 1978 cited in Unger and Crawford 1992, p. 224). This socialisation process can help to explain why males are better at some behaviours or activities than females. As Parson notes, "Society, not biology, dictate that men and women develop different personality traits and assume different roles" (1955 cited in Williams 1989, p. 11). Society and culture place certain gender role assignments on individuals and this reinforces stereotypes that exist (Willias and Best cited in Beall and Sternberg 1993, p. 228). Women internalise these stereotypes, or simplified images of what women should be, as they are socialised. These stereotypes then become norms or beliefs by which women also measure themselves (Vaughan and Hogg 2002, p. 219). This evidence demonstrates that there is nothing natural or unnatural about women's abilities to participate in the military.



Gender stereotypes have two key impacts on women in the military: the perceptions of wider society and the perceptions about women within the military. General social expectations of a woman's role can prevent women from entering the military and also restrict the roles that are available to them. The culture of military is viewed as more masculine than feminine, and the perceived role of females is that they should not be soldiers. As noted by United States Defense Secretary Korb, "The administration was...merely reflecting the mood of the public by keeping women out of combat positions" (Korb cited in Williams 1989, p. 58). This view was also reflected in Australia in 1984 when the Hawke Labor government said, "community attitudes in Australia do not accept that women should perform a fighting role" (Bomford 2001, p. 119). People do not like seeing women on the frontline as it does not fit their stereotypes and voters perceive women as concerned with peace initiatives not war (Moghaddam 1998, p. 405). Indeed, it appears that cultural perception due to stereotypes, rather than any innate abilities, have kept women from expanding their roles in the military.

Gender stereotypes also operate within the military and affect what roles women can perform and the assessment of their ability. The Grey Report of 1998 found overwhelming evidence that there existed a monoculture and leadership model within the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA), which had a strong bias towards physicality and masculinity (Grey 1998, p. x). This culture causes pressure on female cadets to become 'honorary' men and take male attitudes to competition (Grey 1998, p. xiv). This is a condition that is not unique to ADFA but is found in many other Western academies that try to integrate females (Lathlean 1999, p. 72). In essence, the research shows that even the integration of women into expanded military roles is fraught with cultural perceptions and stereotypes that further exclude their participation.

In addition, the fact that women are already underrepresented in the military means that stereotypes remain unchallenged, which in turn can result in continued exclusion. The low number of women in all military units might result in a negative, gender biased evaluation of performance in work contexts, and, in turn, have serious implications for work assignments, promotions and pay (Pazy and Oron 2001, p. 690). In the American and Australian military, women are still excluded from direct combat positions, and because of this, they continue to be seen as inferior and subordinate to males and do not win pay and promotions (Titunik 2002, p. 230). The greater numbers of men, and the wider range of roles they undertake, ensure men monopolise positions of authority and set official policy (Williams



1989: 10). This excludes women from certain roles, segregates them in training and prevents women from setting policy and ultimately changing the culture of the military.

Given that the face of warfare is changing, it is particularly surprising that the male oriented environment of the military does not value the skills, attributes and qualities that women can bring to being a soldier. It is recognised that, "The defence force traditionally treats women with defensiveness, ... rather than treating them as a talented and untapped resource" (Bonford 2001, p. 124). Warfare requires a high degree of cohesiveness across a single unit and ironically requires the qualities of submissiveness, obedience, fidelity and a "spirit of cooperation" (Titunik 2002, pp. 231-232). These are traits typically identified with women. Because modern warfare is often conducted at a distance, the traditional demanding physical requirements may need to be reassessed (Bonford 2001, p. 129). The new high technology warfare needs high intelligence, quicker comprehension, greater dexterity and better agility – all qualities with which women are generally credited (Bonford 2001, p. 127). The military may need to accept that a strong organisation is multi-skilled and not everyone needs to have the same skills.

In light of the military environment and requirements, it appears that being a 'good' soldier is more related to the attributes that an individual can bring to the role, rather than simply their gender. Viewing gender as a dichotomy is misleading because male-female orientation is a continuum, and individuals can therefore have male and female traits in varying degrees (Moghaddam 1998, p. 412). Although on a continuum, some women will clearly be outperformed by some men, while other women will outperform some men (Bonford 2001, p. 127). Therefore, recruitment of soldiers should be based on ability rather than gender.

Having viewed the sociobiological and cultural viewpoints separately until now, it is instructive to analyse how the two interact to unfairly influence the view that women are inferior frontline fighters. Neither the sociobiological nor cultural explanation of gender role assignment is deterministic; in fact they are interdependent (Williams and Best cited in Beall and Sternberg 1993, p. 253). However, the sociobiological approach views gender as part of the 'natural' order of things (Moghaddam 1998, p. 411) and therefore gender roles are harder to change or eliminate gender differences in the short term by changing the socialisation process (Moghaddam 1998, p. 411). Our gender roles are malleable – socialisation is a lifelong process and so the process by which gender can be recreated (Herbert 1998, p. 116). This malleability could indeed be a way to redress the exclusion of women from the military.

Since gender roles are malleable, socialisation processes can potentially be used to improve the success of women as soldiers and improve opportunities available to them. As previously stated, the effectiveness of female soldiers has been restricted by social and military stereotypes about women's physical and psychological abilities. Currently female soldiers are not as good or competent as male soldiers because they are not provided with the same training, treatment or opportunities to prove that they are as capable (Smith 2001, p. 32). By recognising that warfare is changing and identifying the skills that any soldier requires in the military, policies and processes can be implemented to recruit, train and support the attributes required for that role. The key is to treat soldiers as individuals rather than as a part of a gender group (Jones 2002, p. 54). Such equal treatment will improve the accomplishments of women in the military and thus improve the social perceptions of female soldiers. Successful women in the military can help break down the stereotypes that exist in wider society and improve women's standing.

In reflecting on the role of gender in the military, both the sociobiological and cultural models have been considered. While there are some biological restrictions on the competence of female soldiers, there is little evidence to support the claim that women are inferior to men as frontline fighters. In fact, the common view of women's inferiority is based on sociobiological misconceptions about physical ability, social roles that exist in the military, and cultural stereotypes. Therefore, to a large extent, social rather than individual restrictions limit how females perform as soldiers. There is no reason why female soldiers cannot be as competent as male soldiers or participate in direct combat situations. However, to reach these goals, the socialisation of women in society, and particularly in the military, will have to be adjusted so that individuals are measured on their ability alone rather than their gender.

Reference list omitted.



TOPIC SENTENCES

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