

Inquiring Minds Topic -17 September 2021

Roger Palms, Moderator

Women in war

Rachel Grimes served three tours of Northern Ireland as an officer in the British army. Her colleagues in the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the region's erstwhile police force, noticed that things were different when she—the only woman present—joined police and army patrols. The team's behavior changed. Fellow soldiers behaved with more restraint. At checkpoints, locals stopped to talk for longer. She did not notice these things at the time.

Her epiphany came years later when she deployed as a gender adviser to United Nations forces in the Democratic Republic of Congo. She recalls seeing women and children gathered on the edge of a village—victims of rape cast out by their communities. “The last thing a Congolese woman wants to see is a man in uniform in a place where soldiers commit a lot of rape. But a woman in uniform is different.” At one meeting with women in Eringeti, on the edge of Virunga National Park, the information they shared about when and where attacks might occur was far more useful than other intelligence gleaned by the U.N.

Between 1957 and 1989 only 20 women ever served as U.N. peacekeepers, anywhere. But the number of female soldiers has been growing of late. Women now make up a fifth of officers in the US Army, for example. In 16 countries, including Britain and France, as well as America, they are allowed to serve in combat roles once reserved for men. The growth has prompted new thinking about what female soldiers can bring to soldiering. It is also forcing commanders to confront the impact war has on women more generally.

In many respects, the U.N. has played a leading role in championing female soldiers. It has pledged to increase the share of women in military forces from 1% in 1993 to 15% by 2028, and to 20% in police units. “This is not just a question of numbers,” claimed Antonio Guterres, the U.N.'s secretary general, in 2019, “but also of our effectiveness in fulfilling our mandates.” Among the pioneers were 103 Indian women sent to Liberia in 2007 as the first all-female police unit. Subsequently, all-female police units from Bangladesh were deployed to Haiti and Congo. Such ideas are spreading more widely. Canada's chief of defense staff, the country's most senior officer, has a gender adviser. So too do the chiefs of Canada's army, navy and air force. NATO, where Lieutenant-Colonel Grimes now works, has also made the issue a priority. General Curtis Scaparrotti, who was NATO's top commander until 2019, points to America's use of all-female units, or Female Engagement Teams, in Iraq, where they were called Lioness teams, and later in Afghanistan. “Women had a great deal of influence in those families and societies,” he recalls. Yet conservative norms and cultural taboos often prevented male troops from interacting with them.

In modern wars, soldiers do more than just inflict violence on enemies. They also build trust and gather intelligence. And when predominantly male forces interact with women, too often it goes badly. In 2011 the U.S. Army conducted a study to ask why so many Afghan soldiers had attempted to murder their Western colleagues. One recurrent complaint was Western troops “violating female privacy during searches,” particularly on night raids. “They take photos of women even when we tell them not to,” complained an Afghan soldier. Female American

soldiers, noted the study, “were viewed as having better attitudes and being more respectful and respected.”

Women often find that they can navigate the battlefield in unique ways. “Being a female soldier means that you’re almost like a third gender,” says Captain Lizzy Millwater, a British officer. “You can engage the male population on patrol, but you are also then able to engage with the women and children without being seen as a threat.” Western armed forces were not the only ones who have learned this lesson. Jacqueline O’Neill, Canada’s ambassador for women, peace and security, notes that most suicide-bombers for Boko Haram, a Nigerian jihadist group, are women. “They know women can have more access in markets, and are less likely to be searched at checkpoints,” she says.

Yet many armies have been slow to make use of this experience. “We do a fairly good job at promoting this in other places, like Africa and Latin America,” says Joan Johnson-Freese, a professor at the U.S. Naval War College in Rhode Island. “But in the United States it is entirely possible to graduate from a professional military education institution and never hear of it.” Studies of U.N. missions have shown that female peacekeepers are more likely to be sent on missions later in a conflict, when fewer bullets are flying. They are particularly underrepresented in conflicts where pre-existing rates of sexual violence are higher. When they are deployed, they are often kept on base and away from the front lines more than men.

Sabrina Karim of Cornell University has found that women are held back because commanders still feel the need to protect them from danger, even if that prevents them from doing their job. The assumption that the loss of a woman in battle would cause uproar in the media is part of that calculation. “They are time and again barred from making meaningful contributions to the places where they are needed most,” says Dr Karim.

Pushing for more female peacekeepers without dealing with the things that stop them from doing their jobs well carries risks both to the women and to the mission, says Gretchen Baldwin from the International Peace Institute, a think-tank in New York. If they are seen to be there only to fill quotas, the men with whom they are deployed will continue to treat them as mere tokens, not fit to engage in combat.

If, in their haste, countries send women who are ill-prepared, that could make matters even worse. In the early days of all-female units in Afghanistan, for instance, many female troops were in effect ordered to serve in such units regardless of their interest in doing so. “This resulted in [all-female units] that lacked motivation and members with little or no formal training,” noted a U.S. Army study in 2014, “both of which can have serious consequences for mission success and personnel security.”

Ms Baldwin also points to the hypocrisy of military leaders’ refusal to deploy women to “dangerous areas”—for which they are well trained—while not considering the risk of harassment and worse they face from fellow soldiers. “It’s not at all uncommon for women to say they feel far less safe on base with colleagues than when they are on patrol,” she says. Unsurprisingly, then, progress in meeting the U.N.’s own target for women peacekeepers has been slow. Today the count for female peacekeeping troops stands just above 5%, though the U.N. has said it is “advocating consistently” for troop-contributing countries to speed up. The U.N. does not just argue that women will be more sensitive in dealing with other women. It also argues that female peacekeepers are “critical” for “empowering women in the host country”—that their mere presence helps to promote the idea that a woman can aspire to do any job.

Having women in uniform does not prevent the men in uniform from behaving badly. [It was thought that] the presence of more female soldiers may lead to more reporting of sexual violence by peacekeepers. But in reality, it seems that women find it as hard as men to report on their fellow peacekeepers.

The debate over female peacekeepers reflects wider issues with the role of women in national armed forces. On the surface, women are more accepted than ever, even in combat roles. A poll of American troops and veterans in January 2019 found that 70% approved of women serving in combat roles; 30% disapproved. But in reality, many remain skeptical. One European officer recalls male colleagues expressing widespread distrust of efforts to up the number of female peacekeepers: “The sense was that women should not serve in patrol, so why should they be deployed? And if 15 women go, then 15 men don’t get their medals.”

Efforts to bring change can often become hostage to wider culture wars. Last autumn, for instance, the Pentagon delayed the promotion of two female generals for fear that Donald Trump would veto it. In March, shortly after their promotion was secured under Joe Biden, Tucker Carlson, a host on Fox News, mocked the idea that “pregnant women are going to fight our wars...It’s a mockery of the U.S. military.”

Canada’s navy recently redesigned its working uniform to ensure it would not only fit women better, but could also be tailored to provide modesty for those who wanted it. The air force is looking at how to modify ejection seats on training aircraft to lower the minimum body weight required for safe use. And other aircraft are now being designed with female anthropometry in mind. Even obscure bits of military kit are not spared

Modern armies no longer rely on physical brawn alone; they require troops savvy with technology and capable of navigating complex battlefields. They need to change so that women can serve on equal terms. Women shouldn’t have to prove their added value to militaries... The vast majority of women just want to do the job.”

For discussion:

1. Do male soldiers feel the need to protect female soldiers? If so, why do women feel safer on patrol than back in the barracks where they can be harassed?
2. What advice would you offer your granddaughter who wants to enlist?
3. In countries where women are kept down or exploited, can you see the value of female soldiers on the scene? Why?
4. Killed, wounded, captured. How do you think most Americans would react to this?
5. Are we still thinking World War II or Vietnam? Do Americans understand the weaponry and technology of modern warfare? What does it mean that “War is different now”?
6. Would the young men you know fight alongside a woman? Why or why not?