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Ayelet Harel-Shalev and Shir Daphna-Tekoah. *Breaking the Binaries of Security Studies: A Gendered Analysis of Women in Combat*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. ISBN 978-0-19-007258-2.

The Israeli Defence Forces are popularly lauded as the archetypal Armed Forces of 'equality' where men and women serve alongside one another. However, men and women are not equally represented on the front line because, whilst military service is compulsory for both, 'women's service in combat roles is voluntary' (p.8). Set against this context, *Breaking the Binaries of Security Studies* foregrounds women's 'voices and silences' (p.2) to challenge established understandings of war and soldiering, asking what women's experiences can tell us about what it means to be both a combatant and a citizen. The book is methodologically nuanced and an engaging read, brought to life through the testimonies of women veterans woven through the chapters. This is exemplified on the opening page which instantly connects the reader to the research questions by setting out the differences in the language used in citations for bravery awards presented by the Israeli Defence Forces to praise male and female combatants, a manifestation of the gendered binary the book seeks to undermine.

By investigating the political conceptualisation of the combatant, the authors examine the complex discursive landscape, contributing to new understandings of 'how the military manipulates ideas about gender' (p.112). Drawing on Gilligan's Listening Guide from the field of psychology, the book provides a transparent insight into how the authors navigated this discursive landscape. The reader is taken step-by-step through this method which is grounded in analysing not just '*what was said*' but the '*way in which it was said*' (p.37, emphasis in original) and is helpfully provided with examples at each stage, alongside sharing some criticisms of the method (p.41). The sharing of 'I poems', written by women veterans, is the most striking aspect of this methodology, offering an immediately revealing and succinct characterisation of their recalled experiences and capturing them in a way that brings something new and insightful to the later analysis (p.44). Whilst appreciating the need to bound the study, the decision not to include women who pursued military careers beyond the mandatory military service warrants further explanation. Although readers may respect the authors' desire 'to avoid any direct involvement with (or even dependency on) the military', there is a danger that, by sidelining the voices of those who opted for further service, the authors may be reinscribing the silencing of this group (p.22).

The book advocates for a refocussing on women as more than merely subjugated victims (p.21) and encourages an exploration of women as violent state actors. This is an important contribution as it challenges mainstream conceptualisations of women as combatants. The authors enact this through their examination of the positionality of women soldiers as being 'at the same time, both violent state actors and also social actors' (p.16). They describe how women as combatants become perpetrators of state violence, whilst simultaneously subjected to violence by the patriarchal military institution; they ask what this means for them as citizens when they are also subordinated by the societal gender order. The author's critical reflection on the politics of trauma, gender and war, reframes women as 'active agents' (p.70), instead of merely 'victims of abuse', demonstrating the power, both therapeutically and narratively, of listening to women narrate their own stories of trauma in combat.

Making a compelling argument for 'telling and retelling stories' as a 'powerful political practice' (p.98), the authors make an important breakthrough in drawing into conversation the bodily experiences of women combatants with their 'efforts to assimilate themselves into masculine roles' (p.75). By giving political meaning to these bodily experiences, they highlight how listening to women's voices can 'redefine' not just military service but 'warfare' itself, the latter often being omitted from gendered analyses (p.75). By unpacking the political meaning of bodily experiences, this book contributes, through verbatim examples, to a burgeoning literature on the body in feminist IR (McSorley, 2013, Purnell, 2021).

Reflecting on the challenges faced by women combatants both 'as soldiers and as women' (p.112), the syntax of the 'double battle' is an effective conceptualisation and considered in greater depth in the authors' associated paper, 'The "Double-Battle": women combatants and their embodied experiences in war zones' (Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah, 2016). However, whilst the researchers helpfully describe their personal reflexive practice in relation to how their own lives are

enveloped by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I would have liked to hear more of the authors' voices throughout the book, particularly in the analysis. Here, an accompanying reflection on the conversations amongst the research team (given their collocation with the conflict) would have provided further depth to their analysis.

*Breaking the Binaries in Security Studies* is consistent throughout in its determination to deconstruct the polarising stereotypes of gender associated with security. Furthermore, it makes an important contribution to the field of feminist IR, by evidencing the complexity of 'women's active participation in war' and the narratives that surround them (p.13). In the context of contemporary Western debates about inappropriate sexual behaviours in military settings (Defence Committee, 2021, Ministry of Defence, 2019), this book will be invaluable to scholars of critical feminist IR and security studies, by addressing the underpinning patriarchal power relations reinforced by powerful testimonies, to which such behaviours can be attributed.

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## Biography of reviewer

Hannah West is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Cardiff University working on an ESRC-funded project, 'Non-combatants on the "front line": British Army control of servicewomen's war labour in Northern Ireland'. Hannah's research explores gendered knowledge production around war, combat and the 'front line' through creative methods. She is Co-Chair of the Defence Research Network ([defenceresnet.org](http://defenceresnet.org)).

WestH2@cardiff.ac.uk