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Hannah West

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A Negotiated Gender Order: British Army Control of Servicewomen in ‘Front Line’ Counterinsurgency, 1948–2014

HANNAH WEST 

Newcastle University, UK

This conceptual paper critically analyses how the British Army exercises control over the production of knowledge about women’s war labour in ‘front line combat’ and how women exert agency to resist this. 2018 saw all British military roles opened to women, yet it is a myth to say that women are only now able to serve in ‘front line combat’. The paper reveals a complex negotiated gender order or ‘bargain’ between the British Army and servicewomen seeing the latter controlled through their co-option, embodied by compliant military femininities, whilst permitting them some agency to resist. Driven by military need, sustaining this ordering has repeatedly seen women exposed to unnecessary risk. This critical feminist history contributes to conceptual development through deconstructing gendered knowledge systems, arguing that foregrounding women’s voices is central to furthering the cultural turn in war studies.

KEYWORDS gender order, women, military, agency, knowledge systems

Introduction

Women have a long history of being in ‘front line combat’¹ and the myth of their absence has long been dispelled in critical scholarship (Enloe 1988; MacKenzie

¹The term ‘front line combat’ is placed in quotation marks to represent it as a discursive construction, thus questioning how both the ‘front line’ and ‘combat’ are defined and undermining the assumption that there is an agreed definition to either a place or action.

2015). The history of servicewomen's participation in 'front line combat' as one of linear progression is increasingly challenged (Noakes 2006; Sherit 2020). This paper is about 'how' this happens, what it is that controls women's war labour and how it is sustained. It exposes how discursive constructions of women, as combatants, are used to establish boundaries to 'front line combat' and determine who is permitted to legitimately narrate war stories. We are seeing increased public interest in women's involvement in war, illustrated by the publishing of women's military memoirs (Williams 2006; Lemmon 2016; Smith 2016; Taylor 2016; Westley 2016; Hegar 2017; Allen 2020; Hickson 2020). However, it is not always clear whether these voices serve to reinscribe or challenge masculinized narratives of how we know war. Emerging scholarship in war and culture studies is beginning to critically examine the lived experiences of female combatants and what this can tell us about institutional culture, gendered operational policies and knowledge production. This paper brings into dialogue the 'negotiated order' of John Hockey (1986) and the 'gender order' of Raewyn Connell (1987), exposing a negotiated gender order in the British Army, a conceptual framework or dynamic that sustains women as compliant and controlled but also tolerates their limited agency and resistance, in order to satisfy a military need for servicewomen's war labour on the 'front line'.

This paper describes a gendered 'encounter' with military power, grounded in poststructuralism and critical feminism, to explore the politics of knowledge production about war (Tickner 1997; Baker et al. 2016). By 'approaching military power as a question' (Basham et al. 2015: 1), this research destabilizes conceptions of war, underpinned by the gender binary that associates men and war, women and peace – so succinctly articulated by Elshain's 'Just Warrior' and 'Beautiful Soul' (1995) – and from which gendered subjects and behaviours are derived. The servicewoman, by associating women and war challenges this gender binary, becoming problematic to both camps (Goldstein 2018: 4). By foregrounding women's situated and subjugated knowledges of 'front line combat' (Foucault 1980; Haraway 1988), this research is contributing to a rethinking of the 'feminist fables about gender and the military' (Basham and Bulmer 2017: 66) by presenting servicewomen as an alternative to the woman as victim. By seeking to identify how gendered boundaries are constructed and sustained, resisted or dismantled, I will reveal what remains unseen in 'feminist knowledge about militaries' (Basham and Bulmer 2017: 60–61) and respond to Duncanson and Woodward's call to examine 'how and where the inclusion of women moves beyond tokenism and backlash in a military context' (2016: 23). Recognizing the 'special role' that 'combat' plays in understandings of 'manhood' and 'the superiority of maleness in the social order' (Enloe 1988: 12–13), this research has implications for how we understand war, military power and even patriarchy.

This paper uses counterinsurgency as a form of warfare through which to explore the long but forgotten history of women's involvement. It draws on empirical material from three British counterinsurgency campaigns – Malaya, Northern Ireland, Afghanistan – spanning a seventy year period, from which evidence for a negotiated gender order appears. Counterinsurgency is widely understood as a

form of political warfare² (Kilcullen 2012), known colloquially as war amongst the people. A guerrilla enemy hides themselves in the local population. Consequently, the conflict space sees soldiers and development practitioners working in close proximity, sometimes together, in what has been critiqued as ‘armed social work’ (Connable 2013: 1; Turner 2014: 79; Nagaraj 2015; Owens 2015). Despite the association between population-centric counterinsurgency, ‘socially constructed femininity’ and the ‘gendered logic of protector/protected’ (Duncanson and Cornish 2012: 147, 161), gendered analyses of counterinsurgency are sparse, with far greater coverage of gender in association with peacekeeping (Olsson and Tryggestad 2001; Mazurana et al. 2005; Heathcote and Otto 2014; Duncanson 2016). This is not to say that women are completely absent from the literature of historical counterinsurgency campaigns, in particular Kenya and Algeria (Seferdjeli 2004, 2005; Vince 2010; Bruce-Lockhart 2014), but that the scholarship that tells these stories has had limited impact on the mainstream body of counterinsurgency literature and campaign analyses where women are hardly mentioned (Ramakrishna 2001; Strachan 2007; Tuck 2007; Kilcullen 2010; King 2010; Marston and Malkasian 2010; Ucko 2010; Hack 2012a, 2012b; Jones and Smith 2013; Burke 2015; Marshall 2017; Smith 2017). This paper uses the messy spaces of conflict that constitute counterinsurgency, where the enemy is uncertain and difficult to distinguish from the population, and women as counterinsurgents straddle development and military activity, as a form of warfare for exploring the gendered boundaries of ‘front line combat’. Through the positionality of the servicewoman as counterinsurgent, this paper challenges ‘the distinctions between what is “inside” the military and what is “outside” the military’ (Basham et al. 2015: 1) recognizing how in ‘the very act of trying to solidify boundaries that are fluid, space opens up for contestation and political intervention’ (Basham and Bulmer 2017: 68).

Methodologically, this study employs critical feminist discourse analysis of 55 semi-structured interviews with veterans of Northern Ireland, Afghanistan and contemporary operations as well as archival records from private papers, biography, audio/film archives and policy documents from across the three campaigns, accompanied by autoethnographic reflections.³ A former Naval Air Engineer, I spent two years working for the Military Stabilization Support Group, deploying to Afghanistan as a stabilization planner working in the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Helmand and lead for ‘female engagement’. The campaigns were chosen because of my personal insight into the Afghanistan campaign, and the recognition of their significance in shaping the mainstream narrative of a ‘British approach to counterinsurgency’ (Dixon 2012).

The Malaya Emergency (1948–1960) was an ‘End of Empire’ campaign between the British government and their Commonwealth Armed Forces and the Malayan

²‘The military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency’ (Headquarters Department of the Army 2006).

³Interviewees cited in the paper are anonymized at their request but where they expressed that they wanted their words attributed, I felt it important to honour this request and hence there are a mixture of anonymized and named citations.

Communist Party and their Malayan National Liberation Army (Komer 1972), through which Britain ultimately ceded independence to Malaya. Malayan counter-insurgency built on a British history of colonial policing (Nagl 2005) with ‘hearts and minds’ becoming the resonant epithet for classical counterinsurgency but whose legacy has been recently challenged by academics evidencing a brutal campaign of ‘coercion and repression’ (Dixon 2012: 12; French 2012; Bennett 2009). Despite results in Borneo (1962–1966), Aden (1963–1967) and Dhofar (1964–1975) which were, at best, mixed (Marston and Malkasian 2010), the sense of British superiority in classical counterinsurgency prevailed with little advancement in doctrine in the intervening years (Nagl 2005). The Northern Ireland conflict, referred to as both the Troubles or Operation Banner (1968–1998), represented three decades of conflict between the Protestant Unionist majority who wished to remain a part of the United Kingdom and Catholic Nationalist minority who wished to become a part of a united Ireland (Iron 2008). But, the assumption that the campaign was successful as a result of a ‘well understood and coherent approach’ building on colonial experience does not reflect the reality of incremental strategic development specific to the Northern Irish context which fundamentally saw a shift from ‘military-led counter-insurgency to the Police-led internal security policy’ (Tuck 2007: 166, 180). The cultural difference between a counterinsurgency campaign on home soil and one on the other side of the world was something Britain was to revisit in Iraq and then Afghanistan. The British withdrawal from Basra in 2009 marked a reputational low point for Britain as a counterinsurgency leader amongst its allies and it entered Afghanistan keen to redress this (Dixon 2012). The United States launched Operation Enduring Freedom in response to the 9/11 attacks in 2001 to defeat the Taliban, followed swiftly by the implementation of an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) (Maley 2002). Unlike Malaya and Northern Ireland, from the onset, the Afghan conflict had a gendered narrative, born out of the ‘lineage of colonial thinking about the Other’ (Manchanda 2020: 6; Jabbra 2006). For example, the initial military intervention was presented in terms of a ‘duty to protect vulnerable women’ (Wibben and McBride 2012: 201), thus mobilising the Afghan woman as ‘someone in need of saving’ (Abu-Lughod 2002: 788; Manchanda 2020).

This paper examines the discursive constructions being used to control access to spaces of war and deny certain voices from narrating war to understand how a negotiated gender order works. Associated with the notion of ‘fitting in’, recognition of the denial of women’s agency is widespread (Sjoberg 2007; Hudson 2009; McEvoy 2009; King 2016). But it is not the case that servicewomen are either co-opted into the institution or trying to change it. It is equally not the case that all servicemen are going about their everyday lives looking to perpetuate constructions that exclude women. There is a complicated interaction between military institutional culture and individual agency – a navigation between complicity and co-option, resistance and subversion. The negotiated gender order provides a conceptual framework for explaining where this power over knowledge production resides and the interaction between resistance and compliance in the British Army.

Reflecting on my own military service and my positionality as a critical feminist scholar, I have had to get to grips with a certain ‘messiness’ (West and Antrobus 2021). My own insider-outsider positionality is ‘complex’ and can appear ‘contradictory’ but has a ‘disruptive potential’ in holding up a mirror to the contradictions and ambiguities that help to render ‘strange’ the military institution (Basham and Bulmer 2017). Understanding this complicated dynamic and foregrounding women’s voices is central to a ‘more inclusive vision of the study of war’ (Evans 2007). This paper sets out a conceptual argument, drawing on empirical material, that seeks change by foregrounding women’s stories of ‘front line combat’ to expose the gendered dynamic that controls them. It opens by articulating the sawtooth profile of women’s participation across the three counterinsurgency campaigns. I then introduce the negotiated gender order, examining it through empirical examples foregrounding women’s voices to explore, firstly, how women’s war labour has been controlled consider and, secondly, how women have resisted imposed boundaries. Finally, I close by detailing the implications of these findings.

The sawtooth profile

Through my analysis, I have derived the characterization of the history of women’s participation in ‘front line’ counterinsurgency as a sawtooth, whereby periods of linear progression towards greater presence and recognition of women on the ‘front line’ are followed by reactions that often curtailed women’s presence in some way. This sawtooth describes a profile of momentum lost, of participation – driven by a perceived tactical need for women on the ground – and containment – driven by a strategic need to forget them.

Retracing women’s presence in the mainstream narratives of the military campaigns in Malaya, Northern Ireland and Afghanistan evidences this sawtooth profile. The Malaya Emergency in the 1950s saw Lady Templer, the wife of General Templer, High Commissioner at the time, establish a women’s outreach programme working with the Women’s Institute and British Red Cross (West 2021a). The programme was on a large scale across the country and General Templer saw it as supporting the counterinsurgency campaign, explaining how ‘if we really can get at the women of this country, and particularly the Malay women, we shall have done quite a big thing’ (Templer 1952; West 2021a). And yet, these women remain absent in the enduring mainstream campaign narrative (West 2021a). General Templer’s ‘hearts and minds’ rhetoric has a stronghold on British counterinsurgency doctrine but the presence of British women, serving and civilian, has been forgotten (West 2021a). Moving on to Northern Ireland, from the earliest days of the conflict, the British Army needed women for searching and interviewing, to free up men and as decoys. This was a tactical need derived from soldier’s experiences out on the ground. In the early 1970s, women were recruited into the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR), becoming known as ‘Greenfinches’, to work alongside women from the Women’s Royal Army Corps (WRAC) and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). These women went out on

patrol as radio operators and searchers, unarmed and dressed in skirts (as it was thought that the IRA would not target women). Women were also deployed as covert operators. Their stories tell of a routine ‘front line’ presence, including being in command of mixed infantry units. They talk of being shot at, targeted with IEDs and having their vehicles lethally sabotaged. The story of women’s military service in Northern Ireland again did not endure. It was ten years into the Afghanistan campaign, before Female Engagement Teams (FETs) were introduced by the Americans, adopted by NATO and mandated to the British Army. The FET mission in Afghanistan was to ‘directly engage Afghan men and women, build trust and influence the Afghan population in order to support the battlespace owner’s intent’ (Land Warfare Centre 2011: 2). These teams were visibly welcomed by a public-facing narrative based on empowering and protecting women and an internal narrative based on operational effectiveness. Yet, at the same time as being visibly welcomed, they were invisibly undermined by ill-defined policy, inadequate resourcing and training and unhelpful discursive constructions that characterized them as inanimate weapon systems. These same patterns are being repeated in the development of the current British Army Human Security Advisers.⁴

These women are more than just forgotten voices. Their absence has implications for how we understand war and military power. It is this ‘how’ that I want to return to now: how discursive constructions are used keep women out of these masculinized spaces whether that be war, the military institution or the military community. I argue that it is the cumulative effect of both this sawtooth profile that stalls momentum combined with control of the discursive constructions of women which has the real compounding impact on the gendering of knowledge production about war. Discursive constructions of women, as combatants, are employed as tools to hide, contain and make acceptable their presence. The servicewomen employed as covert operators in Northern Ireland were not only hidden in the covert sense, but their chain of command within the WRAC were often unaware that they were doing anything other than a desk job. Servicewomen operating in FETs in Afghanistan were made acceptable by highlighting one-off exceptional individuals in contrast to a largely incompetent majority. This undermined the teams but enabled the argument to be detached from debates around women in ground close combat. This paper will go on to demonstrate how a negotiated gender order operates in the British Army to sustain a dynamic whereby servicewomen are at once controlled and compliant whilst simultaneously tolerating limited agency and resistance.

A negotiated gender order

Raewyn Connell embedded the concept of the gender order and hegemonic masculinity into the study of the sociology of gender with her book, *Gender and Power*

⁴A Human Security Adviser is a ‘UK military service person responsible for assisting planning functions in incorporating Human Security considerations and Sex and Age Disaggregated Data into military planning’ (Ministry of Defence 2021: vii, 7). FETs employed in Afghanistan were subsumed into the remit of Cultural Advisers, which later became Gender Advisers before being relabelled as Human Security Advisers.

(1987; Schippers 2007). Despite critiques of its rigidity (Belkin 2001; Higate 2003; Duncanson 2013), what Connell's conceptualization usefully brings to this study is the sense that the gender order 'is not trouble-free': the subordination of women to men takes various forms: compliance, resistance and 'complex strategic combinations of compliance, resistance or forms of non-compliance' (1987: 296). I argue that a negotiated gender order operates in the British Army to sustain a dynamic whereby servicewomen are controlled through a balance between compliance and tolerated limited resistance. Military power is a system of knowledge production, legitimizing narratives and institutionalizing them, not only in the military but in society (Barkawi and Brighton 2011), and which embodies the gendered military institution (Carreiras 2006: 40). Moving beyond the conceptualization of the military organization as a fixed organizational culture defined by gender, the negotiated gender order provides a framework to explain where this power over knowledge production resides. John Hockey's 1986 book, *Squaddies*, applied the negotiated order to the British Army to explain the 'routine relationships between privates and their superiors' and the differences between the formal power structures and the informal acts of deviance and resistance of the private soldier. This section will expose the negotiated gender order through, firstly, British Army attempts to control women's war labour and, secondly, how women have resisted boundaries imposed on them.

The negotiated gender order provides a framework for exploring the aforementioned 'in-between' positionality of servicewomen in order to trouble the 'co-option/subversion' binary (Basham and Bulmer 2017). Jean Bethke Elshtain's autoethnographical passages on the seductions of war (1995), set up the messy positionality of the militarized subject: conformity with official demands and deviance through 'unofficial patterns of behaviour' (Hockey 1986: 1), the intra-action between the geopolitical and the everyday (Basham 2013) and the performance of gendered identities (Butler 1990). Similarly, Davis' research captures how the organization – as a result of 'political and legal directives' on the 'equitable treatment of women and men' and the effort of servicewomen to 'adapt and address injustices' – either effects or resists change' (1997: 193–194), reinforcing the sense of enacting visible policy but resisting unwelcome change. Whilst Sasson-Levy has written of the tension between 'resistance to and compliance with the military gender order' (2003), she does so from the perspective of how the servicewoman negotiates their place without recognizing that the military needs to sustain this negotiated gender order because they need women on the ground and this negotiation enables that without challenging the institutional cultures.

In Afghanistan, FETs were located in a space where this new gendered policy was both welcomed and undermined, met with both acceptance and reluctance from those they had to work with. The military through the negotiated gendered order needed these servicewomen to enact this new policy to satisfy external international military direction but they also did not want to them to be a challenge to the internal culture of the British Army. Similarly, in Northern Ireland servicewomen were needed but the British Army did not want to acknowledge what they were doing. Negotiated order

theory was set out by Strauss (1978), building on Mead's analysis that 'concerted action (social order) must be reconstituted continually; or [...] "worked out"' (1964: 148). A negotiated order eschews an inherent stability in social organizational structures in favour of a social order brought about through social interactions whereby any disruption results in a renegotiation (Day and Day 1977). But critical military literature has tended to look at how women 'fit in' in the military from the perspective of servicewomen as wanting the right to fight (Sasson-Levy 2003; Taber 2005). As a derivative of military power and gendered knowledge production, the negotiated gender order is sustained in order to satisfy the military's tactical need for women but containing their potential to change the patriarchal institution.

Controlling women's war labour

Through the discursive construction of women as counterinsurgents, the British Army has attempted to control women's war labour by hiding, containing or making acceptable their presence, across the three campaigns. During the Malaya Emergency, the British women employed or volunteering to organize the outreach programmes of the Women's Institute and British Red Cross were characterized, as the 'volunteering wife', 'proselytiser' and 'female pioneer', to provide an acceptable means of negotiating women's presence in Malaya with the British public audience (West 2021a). They were presented as exotic and exciting, even radical and revolutionary with Lady Templer confessing that 'she has not read the rules (and has now lost them) and does not intend to take much notice of them' (Herbertson 1952). However, their remit was simultaneously limited to acceptable traditional employment, reinforcing their place as wives and custodians of the concerns of women and children only (West 2021a). They could be both overtly and physically present in a 'combat' zone but also distanced from being in 'combat' by the nature of their work. Only enemy propaganda attempted to frame Lady Templer as a 'woman bandit' drawing her into 'combat' (West 2021a) about which she reflected, 'we really must be doing well if they bother to be unpleasant about us' (Templer 1953). Similarly, the uniformed women's presence of the WRAC and the Police Force received limited recognition with reporting documenting their social lives and their work dismissed as geographically distant and peripheral to the military campaign. Whilst even veterans themselves often did not perceive themselves as having "'active" participation in the counterinsurgency campaign', one goes on to describe her role 'keep[ing] the "Rogues Gallery" [of killed terrorists] current', a function that would make her a junior intelligence analyst in today's British Army (Evans, M. Letter to Hannah West, 18 March 2019). And yet the women's outreach programmes had the strategic intent to influence the direction of the campaign, being part of General Templer's vision for Malaya and aligned with the intent of the Briggs Plan⁵ (West 2021a). General Templer and Oliver Lyttelton, Secretary

⁵The Briggs Plan was written in 1950 by Lieutenant General Sir Harold Briggs, then Director of Operations in Malaya, emphasising the political dimension and need to protect the population from the Communists to win their support (Nagl 2005: 71–72).

of State for the Colonies, both considered them to be making a significant and direct contribution to building community resilience (West 2021a). The distancing of women from ‘front line combat’ through these framings is subtle and convenient. Subtle because there was simply no logic in including these civilian welfare workers and clerical staff as having a place in the operational narrative of a military conflict. Convenient because the discourses that came to characterize these women reinforced their feminine qualities to strengthen the divide between them and combat. Making visible women’s war labour, demonstrates the messiness and blurred boundaries of combat, war and soldiering and undermines the privileging of the male fighting force.

During the Northern Ireland conflict, the British Army attempted to control women’s war labour by sustaining the narrative that they were non-combatants through policy direction that kept them unarmed and wearing skirts (Ulster Defence Regiment 1973; Sherit 2020). It was assumed that the IRA would fear the public backlash if they killed a woman (Ulster Defence Regiment 1973) or as one Greenfinch recounted, ‘apparently, according to the Colour Sergeant, a well-known fact that if the IRA saw your legs then they wouldn’t shoot you’ (Wilson 2010: 27). One interviewee recalled ‘being picked up in a skirt on patrol and put in a helicopter, taken to the border patrol and jumping out’ (Linda Titmarsh, Greenfinch veteran NI-4, 2019, Interviewed by Hannah West, 2 May). This satisfied a public desire not to put them in harm’s way and an internal need not to undermine military masculinity. British Security Forces decided that sustaining the ‘feminine’ servicewoman and thus bolstering the sense that they were not combatants was more important than allowing them to dress in a way that was fit for purpose for patrolling day and night.

In Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s, the determination of the British Security Forces for female soldiers to remain unarmed non-combatants undermined their personal safety and increased their exposure to risk. This did not mean that women did not go out on patrol, but it meant they were protected by a man. On patrol, individuals were taught not to stand together because ‘if somebody was coming up with a gun, they could have shot both of you’, meaning that women were ‘standing on one side of the street, and the policeman that was with you was on the other side, and he was the one that was armed, you know?’ (Nicola Williams, Greenfinch veteran, NI-7, 2019, Interviewed by Hannah West, 2 May). This ‘attempt’ to protect women, belies an overriding intention to ensure servicewomen remained unarmed, and actually put them at a greater personal risk. Similarly, servicewomen were without even a baton during riot control, ‘hold[ing] back a crowd with nothing, just my arms [...] and my authority to say, ‘You can’t come back here, there’s a bomb’ (RUC veteran, NI-14, 2019, Interviewed by Hannah West, 25 July).

And yet, at the same time, 14 Intelligence Company were employing women on covert operations. Having been armed and trained alongside the men they operated with, they were employed to make covert activities blend in with the environment and communities surrounding them, for example by working alongside male

operators so that they appeared to the public as a couple (Ford 1997; WRAC veteran, NI-8, 2019, Interviewed by Hannah West, 5 March; British Army veteran, NI-11, 2019, Interviewed by Hannah West, 4 April). ‘Trying to pass off a male operator as a woman on a static surveillance task had been attempted but it had obvious disadvantages’ (British Army veteran, NI-11, 2019, Interviewed by Hannah West, 4 April). Consequently, women as covert operators were involved in running debriefing houses, where ‘the whole house was wired’, developing relationships with agents or being questioners when women were not seen ‘as a threat or in any way combative’ such that interviewees ‘would open up [...] about things’ (WRAC veteran, NI-8, 2019, Interviewed by Hannah West, 5 March.). British Security Forces repeatedly tried to control the narrative about women’s participation to quell any question that these women were involved in combat. Even as late as 1995, by which time women were armed, they were often only permitted to be supernumeraries on patrol (Charlie Sloan, British Army veteran, NI-12, 2019, Interviewed by Hannah West, 4 April).

Fifteen years later in Afghanistan, the British Army manipulated the narrative surrounding FETs to present them as being visibly welcomed, in order to satisfy the NATO mandate. They were made acceptable internally by their operational utility based on the simple argument that to not engage women would be ‘ignoring fifty percent of the population who otherwise might support the campaign’ (Rosie Constantine, serving British Army, A-26, 2019, Interviewed by Hannah West, 7 May), with little questioning of why or what for. This was compounded by the public-facing narrative of saving Afghan women championed by Laura Bush, Hillary Clinton and Cherie Blair, which avoided any reflection on the underpinning cultural imperialism (West 2021b). But the British Army attempted to control women’s place by subtly policing the boundaries of ‘front line combat’ to distance women by setting them up to fail (West 2021b). Servicewomen’s lives were put at risk through inadequate resourcing and training, compounded by an unclear purpose perpetuated by being kept in a state of trial. The MOD admits that ‘there were numerous instances of them being ill-prepared to be ‘engaging frequently “outside the wire”’ where their poor [weapon handling] skills were putting other patrol members at risk’ (Ministry of Defence 2017, ID-17054). So shocked was one of the FET by the paucity of training – ‘they had not done any infantry tactics, they had not done any pistol training, they had not done any language training’ – that she began to fear this had the potential for corporate negligence or manslaughter, ‘because if one of these people gets killed, it will be because they weren’t prepared’ (Rachel Stockton, British Army veteran, A-25, 2019).

A consistent tool employed by the British Army to control women has been the production of compliant military femininities, and the ‘exceptional woman’ has been used across the three campaigns. This construction sees individual women presented as pioneers who ‘stand out on the basis of their individual contributions to a wider war effort that is largely male’ (Woodward and Winter 2007: 24). This idea of the exceptional and the incompetent came up time and again in interviews where examples of women in FETs or simply examples of women soldiers were described

enthusiastically as these exceptional and impressive women. Being the exception to the rule made them acceptable. You could have women being effective on ‘front line’ patrols but only if they were one-offs, not the norm: ‘she absolutely got stuck in, had strong military skills, her unit loved her. She gave a really good impression’ (British Army veteran, A-3, 2016, Interviewed by Hannah West, 24 June). To be exceptional in this environment seemed often to require only that you could do the same as your male colleagues – ‘she also was of the character that she could stand on her own’ (Serving British Army policy-maker, A-20, 2019, Interviewed by Hannah West, 22 Jan) – it didn’t necessarily mean excelling beyond your peers. The rest of the FETs were thought of as incompetent and this largely equated to their soldiering skills – unfit, not strong enough and lacking vital patrolling skills: ‘put a bergen on her back and she would fall over. So, we couldn’t take her out. She couldn’t handle going out on patrol’ (British Army veteran, A-3, 2016, Interviewed by Hannah West, 24 June). This enabled them to be dismissed because if they couldn’t hold their own as soldiers on patrol they were no use. These constructions were embedded in the language of women as well as men reflecting their co-option. Having been awarded for my ‘truly exceptional’ contribution to an initiative – ‘female engagement’ – which is now all but forgotten, I am now well placed to acknowledge how this outwardly positive recognition can be used as a form of control by keeping it from becoming normalized and embedded.⁶ This compliant military femininity of the exceptional soldier was constructed to maintain a veneer of positivity and to provide a ready example of success to quote which would allay accusations of criticizing women soldiers and enable the concept to then be undermined by ostracizing them and putting them at risk through inadequate training and support. This is the most commonly repeated example of the construction of a military femininity across the campaigns but remains one of many discursive constructions used by the British Army to consistently manipulate, misrepresent and forget women’s war labour.

Compounding the impact of these military femininities in controlling women’s war labour is the simultaneous discursive construction of ‘front line combat’, used to police where women were permitted to be. The military system of knowledge production defines ‘front line combat’ ‘as wherever “women” are not’ (Enloe 1988: 15). The policing of this boundary is subtle and involves the interplay of multiple hierarchies determining what ‘front line combat’ is. For example, land operations are privileged over ships and aircraft, with ground close combat being the ultimate test of the male warrior. Gradations of ‘combat’ reflect one’s trade and likely proximity to the ‘front line’; i.e. whether you are in a combat arm (for example, the infantry) or a combat support arm (for example, the artillery or engineers) or a combat service support arm (for example, the logistics corps), with interesting transgressions, for example, ‘combat’ medics.⁷ Servicewomen’s integration into the Armed Forces has been through these gradations, their pre-1990s legacy being strongly associated with logistics, clerical and medical roles (Sherit 2020).

⁶From the citation for my Commander in Chief Fleet’s Commendation.

⁷A divide commonly described as ‘teeth or tail’.

Decisions on the awarding of medals have grappled with equating the level of risk between, say, a gunner in a Forward Operating Base and a submariner deployed for 9 months keeping the nuclear deterrent active. Public discourse, through the media has been co-opted into this ideological work with their simple soundbites, like ‘women on the front line’, failing to capture the nuance of what it means to be ‘on operations’. And then there is the enemy’s part in defining these boundaries: the enemy do not try to decide whether a patrol is a designated ‘combat’ patrol or not before engaging them. Where they choose to engage becomes the ‘front line’. Each historical example sheds light on how women’s war labour was controlled through discursive constructions of ‘front line combat’ and military femininities.

Resisting imposed boundaries

I argue that women have repeatedly transgressed imposed boundaries, defying societal expectations in getting out on the ground and operating on the ‘front line’ and beyond but will go on to show that this agency was contained by the British Army, limited as part of the negotiated gender order. Through more nuanced understandings of how women navigate the gendered system they find themselves in, exploring the interaction between ‘self-expression, social control, informed choice, false consciousness, political resistance, victimhood and passivity emerge’ (Thomas 2016: 335), we move beyond attempts to retell the stories of figures plucked from history as independent ‘enlightened’ beings (Thomas 2016: 326). In Malaya, Lady Templer, afforded unique access as the wife of the High Commissioner, was able to travel to hostile ‘front line’ villages and engage with their communities, a feat that was made invisible in terms of contributing to the military campaign, put down to being a dutiful wife (West 2021a). Margaret Herbertson, the inaugural WI organizer in Malaya, attributes the speed of forming the new WIs to ‘the energies of Lady Templer [...] who, before my arrival, had made a tour of the nine States and two Settlements [forming] temporary Organising Committees in each’ (1953). Miss Viola Williams, who succeeded Miss Margaret Herbertson as in-country organizer, is noted as ‘never spar[ing] herself, travelling all over the Federation in her van, along “Red” roads (those which are not considered safe because there are known to be Communist terrorists in the area) and going to the Institutes wherever they might be’ (Home and Country 1954). The extensive scale of the women’s outreach programmes in support of the counterinsurgency effort demonstrate a movement that transgressed boundaries, only kept out of the sphere of war by its domestic narrative despite members travelling perilous hostile routes to take part (West 2021a).⁸

In Northern Ireland, women were manning checkpoints, searching and on patrol, night after night. One veteran described being a part of the security cordon for the 1981 funeral of Bobby Sands when ‘a shot came through the window of the

⁸270 Women’s Institutes were established across the country by 1955 and estimates suggest that by late 1952 (Barton 1955), the British Red Cross teams were caring for some 200,000–250,000 people (British Journal of Nursing 1952).

Landrover and missed [and came] through the top of my beret', a shot she attributes to the IRA watching and seeing that she was eager to leave the vehicle to tend to a wounded colleague' (Linda Titmarsh, Greenfinch veteran NI-4, 2019, Interviewed by Hannah West, 2 May). Their stories tell of being shot at, their vehicles having their brakes cut, their flats being ransacked and yet they were not thought to be 'front line' combatants (WRAC veteran, NI-8, 2019, Interviewed by Hannah West, 5 March.). Women as covert operators were 'never acknowledged by the military because we weren't allowed to be there' and that 'if you'd have asked her [line manager in WRAC Provost] what I did in Northern Ireland, she would tell you I was the clerk in the office who fed the computer' (WRAC veteran, NI-8, 2019, Interviewed by Hannah West, 5 March.). This meant sewing their own plain clothes to accommodate communications devices and weapon holsters and being armed more than a decade before their counterparts in conventional units (WRAC veteran, NI-8, 2019, Interviewed by Hannah West, 5 March.).

Finally, in Afghanistan, whilst I have no evidence that the ban on women in ground close combat was usurped by the deployment of FETs, their regular presence on 'front line' patrols (along with other servicewomen, especially 'combat' medics) somewhat undermines meaningful understandings of 'combat' exclusion. Across the three campaigns, women negotiated their presence on the 'front line' by harnessing the mainstream discourses of the volunteering wife to get access by accompanying their husbands, by operating outwith the public gaze or by drawing on other qualifications to get a place on the patrol (West 2021a; WRAC veteran, NI-8, 2019, Interviewed by Hannah West, 5 March; British Army veteran, NI-11, 2019, Interviewed by Hannah West, 4 April; Serving British Army, A-10, 2016, Interviewed by Hannah West, 27 May). Through their stories of negotiating their participation, women are telling us that it is possible, that they were there and that they actively chose to be. Women's voices are needed to reconceptualize the 'front line' as somewhere where women have been, where women are and where women can be. But what they do not say, because they cannot see it (as I could not when I was serving) is that this agency is contained. It is a limited agency and resistance which the British Army tolerates in order to satisfy its tactical need for women.

A negotiated gender order sustains a dynamic whereby a tactical need for women can be satisfied whilst strategically women's contribution can be marginalized and explains where this power over knowledge production resides. An example from Northern Ireland exposes the complicated dynamic of the negotiated gender order, showing how the tactical need for some women is kept in tension with a need to avoid acknowledgment of women's war labour and how women's presence was permitted but limited. In 1972, Lance Corporal Sarah Warke was part of an undercover laundry service run by the Military Reaction Force to gather intelligence and came under an attack which killed the driver. Although her exact actions are unclear – the archival records are embargoed – she was awarded the Military Medal, the first to a woman for covert operations (Unwin 2012; Malcher n.d.). And yet there was backlash in reaction to this award resulting in the tightening

of regulations to limit servicewomen's employment (Thursby 1972). The negotiated gender order means that women can be present but as an acceptable minority, limited to lower ranks relative to their male counterparts. On joining up, servicewomen become compliant with the institutional culture in attempting to fit in but simultaneously find ways to navigate these constraints through agency and resistance. In 1980s Northern Ireland, the RUC Chief Constable made the decision to arm the RUC in response to a rising police death toll. This moment was used to try to limit women's employment to that which specifically required a female officer: 'the Chief Constable at that time [...] decided that he didn't want women working, really, because they weren't armed' (RUC veteran NI-17, 2019, Interviewed by Hannah West, 25 July). As it was deemed there were already sufficient women officers, all contract renewals were ceased. This decision was only reversed when the policewomen took their case to the European Court of Justice citing the new Sex Discrimination Act (European Court 1986). The British Army attempts to limit resistance but tolerates it in order to satisfy their tactical need for women whilst evidencing a narrative, acceptable in the public arena, of slow change in an organization unquestioningly respected for its traditions. The negotiated gender order is convenient to the military institution for whom the presence of some women and the appearance of accepting women is vital but for whom a feminist rethinking of military power is intolerable. By providing enough limited evidence of progress for women in the military over time from occasional promotions to senior officer to concessions with uniform regulations or the policy change opening up all branches, servicewomen and external commentators believe in a hopeful narrative that things are getting better. Without critical distance, servicewomen and the institution itself, cannot see military service as gendered (West and Antrobus 2021).

Conclusion

This paper introduces the negotiated gender order as a conceptual framework for understanding how the British Army simultaneously satisfies its tactical need for women through compliance and control whilst tolerating their limited agency and resistance. It adds to critical scholarship recognizing the 'front line' and 'combat' as constructed and contested (Woodward and Jenkins 2011; King 2015; Brodie-Stuart 2019) and 'combat' as a tool for women's exclusion (MacKenzie 2015; Millar and Tidy 2017), by contributing to a reconceptualization of the 'front line' as a site defined by a negotiated gender order. This paper evidences the myth of women's exclusion to have been sustained by not only the discursive constructions of the 'front line' and 'combat' but also women's marginalization from enduring campaign narratives and that it is the cumulative effect of this that has been so effective in silencing women's voices (Noakes 2006; Sherit 2020). It requires a determined and significant effort to repeatedly silence women's stories but the British Army has an ally in the enduring gender binaries that underpin how we understand 'front line combat', 'dangerously overshadow

[ing] other voices, other stories: of pacific males; of bellicose women' (Elshtain 1995: 4), of violent women (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). Not only does this paper demonstrate how the military works hard to maintain a narrative that embeds gender norms and sustains a patriarchal power dynamic, it uncovers how service-women individually negotiate this gendered institution, transgressing imposed boundaries, to participate in 'front line combat'. Visibility is critical to both sides achieving what they want. The military needs women on the ground and women want to be there, and so long as their participation is hidden, obscured or made acceptable, this dynamic is sustained. This is the negotiated gender order sustained by the British Army whereby even women's resistance and transgression is contained and tolerated in order to satisfy their tactical need for women and to sustain an acceptable external narrative.

In setting out a conceptual framework, this paper not only contributes to the feminist challenge against gender binaries (Enloe 1983; Burguières 1990; Cooke 1993; Elshtain 1995; Goldstein 2001; Sjoberg 2007; Charlesworth 2008) but adds to more nuanced understandings of military identities (Goldstein 2001; Higate 2003; Khalili 2011; Duncanson 2016; Greenwood 2016; Catignani and Basham 2020) and, beyond this, provides a detailed examination of how women, as counterinsurgents and combatants, engage with the discourses used to describe their presence, including using them as a means to access. In questioning military power, this research builds on the work of critical military scholars (Higate 2003; Woodward and Winter 2007; Enloe 2010; Basham 2013; Sjoberg 2013) in revealing how military power has been wielded to police where women can be and draw the boundaries of 'front line combat' to keep women out, constructing acceptable narratives to explain women's presence where there is a tactical need and ignoring their increased exposure to risk. Further, in exposing the unnecessary risk service-women have been subjected to as a result, this study enhances the ongoing critique of military power and calls for extending an investigation into contemporary operations. As new understandings of the 'front line' are articulated in gendered ways (O'Gorman 2011; Cockburn 2013; Lamb 2020) but concentrate on the voices of women as victims of combatants supporting non-state actors, this research foregrounds the voices of servicewomen, up to now absent from these visions, reflecting the problematic positionality of the servicewoman in feminist scholarship. By exploring the relationship between compliant and resistant forms of militarized femininities and their co-constitution with military masculinities (Connell 1987; Sjoberg 2007; Welland 2010: 3), I contribute to a more nuanced understanding of control and subversion in the context of servicewomen's agency.

Not only does this study reveal new insight into gendered military identities, behaviours and cultures and how servicewomen navigate them, it has fundamental implications for how we understand war and military power, for example counterinsurgency, 'front line combat' or the military institution. This study extends current gender analyses of counterinsurgency (Khalili 2011; Duncanson and Cornish 2012; Wibben and McBride 2012; Dyvik 2014) in making the case that we cannot consider the servicewoman in isolation from gendered understandings

of warfare and, in fact, that discourses about women as counterinsurgents draw on the perceived nature of counterinsurgency as a feminized form of warfare. By introducing the negotiated gender order, this research argues that embedded and dominant narratives be questioned and unpicked and, in their place, connections be made with debates about the military as a gendered organization (Carreiras 2006; Woodward and Winter 2007) or the relationship between women and combat (Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah 2016; Kemp 2016; Doan and Portillo 2017; Collins-Dogrul and Ulrich 2018).

My unique historiographical approach adds to current literature (Otto 2006; Farnell 2009; King 2016; Goldstein 2018; Holyfield et al. 2019; Sherit 2020) in bringing empirical material into the conceptual argument, reinforcing the pattern of momentum lost described by the sawtooth profile. This study foregrounds the commonality of experience over the last seventy years of British counterinsurgency that transcends the different historical contexts and this makes it easy to see the repeated emergence of exclusionary discourses. Policies are derived and discourses constructed without recognition of the gendered context of warfare and the military. British leaders during the Malaya Emergency might well have seen the women's outreach programmes as integral to their counterinsurgency effort but when the military histories were written, these had been excluded, considered in isolation as a social welfare initiative, and disconnected from military narratives. Again, in Northern Ireland, this study shows how servicewomen's employment is directly connected to military attempts to assert power over 'front line combat'. Finally, in Afghanistan, FETs were very much developed in isolation to any consideration of institutional attitudes towards employing women in this capacity and their likely reception on operations. The disconnect – between operational gendered policies and the gendered institution – translates directly to the decision on lifting the ban on women in ground close combat which, in the light of this research, appears symbolic and futile without opening a debate about the gendered character of the military (Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah 2016; Kemp 2016; Doan and Portillo 2017; Collins-Dogrul and Ulrich 2018; Goldstein 2018). Contributing to a growing body of work (Bastick and Duncanson 2018; Holvikivi 2021), this paper also has immediate application to the current Human Security Advisers, being shaped by discourses that show repetition of the patterns of past campaigns as well as public debates about the treatment of servicewomen in the Armed Forces (Ministry of Defence 2019; House of Commons Defence Committee 2021).

I will close this paper with a two-way call to action. Firstly, I call on the military to question what they mean by 'front line combat' and consider how these terms have been used to control women in campaign after campaign and the implications for servicewomen's exposure to risk. However, I recognize that if women veterans, like myself, cannot see the pervading gendered character of the military when serving, then there is little motivation for the negotiated gender order to be challenged and for anything other than tokenistic progress to be achieved or even attempted. For anything that conflicts 'with the dominant group's ideas on

preferred roles and missions – the essence of the organization – will not be adopted’ and leaders who have been ‘conditioned’ by the organizational culture, will only change this essence if they believe it to be in the ‘long term interests of the organization’ (Nagl 2005: 216). What is needed is a reflexive conversation. Therefore, secondly, I call on feminist scholars to reach out directly to servicewomen and men and engage in dialogue about the problematic intersection between feminism and women’s military service. The critical voices of women veterans are needed to open up this internal debate, by foregrounding women’s stories of ‘front line combat’ to undermine the negotiated gender order, reclaiming women’s histories and re-centering them as part of the narrative of ‘front line combat’ as a form of feminist activism:

‘if women are not perceived to be fully within the structures of power, surely it is power that we need to redefine rather than women?’ (Beard 2017: 83)

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Notes on contributor

Hannah West is a Research Associate at Newcastle University working on the ESRC-funded project, ‘Conflict, Intimacy and Military Wives: A Lively Geopolitics’, and shortly due to commence an ESRC postdoctoral fellowship at Cardiff University. 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).

Correspondence to: Hannah West, Newcastle University, UK. Email: nhw81@ncl.ac.uk

ORCID

Hannah West  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9729-2825>

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