

Women fighters and the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative

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Abstract

This article explores women’s presence in military forces around the world, looking both at women’s service as soldiers and at the gendered dimensions of their soldiering particularly, and soldiering generally. It uses the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative to describe women’s relationship with war throughout its history, and explores how this image of women’s innocence of and abstention from war has often contrasted with women’s actual experiences as soldiers and fighters.



One of the great stories in the history of modern warfare is that of Jeanne d’Arc. With the French on the verge of losing the Hundred Years’ War and Henry VI of England claiming rights to the French throne, teenage Jeanne – inspired by the voices of saints – cut her hair, dressed in a man’s uniform, and took up arms for the French cause. After convincing the French leadership of her calling, Jeanne passed the necessary examinations, and was given troops to command and a military rank as captain. Jeanne d’Arc led the French to their first victories over the British in memory. Particularly, her victory at the battle of Orleans in May of 1429 is widely considered miraculous, and credited with allowing the French to crown Charles VII King of France that summer. At the coronation, Jeanne was given a place of honour next to the king, and ennobled for her services. The next year, however, she was captured in battle and turned over to an ecclesiastical court, which tried her for heresy and witchcraft. Much of her fourteen-month trial centred on her choice of men’s clothes over women’s clothes, with her adversaries claiming that it was a crime against God for a woman to wear men’s clothes. Jeanne was convicted, and burned at the stake on 30 May 1431 – shy of her 20th birthday.

In 1456, a posthumous retrial determined that she was innocent of all charges, and she was named to sainthood in 1920 by Pope Benedict XV.

Part of Jeanne d’Arc’s story is the story of a young, courageous, divinely inspired commander who played a crucial role in saving France from British takeover, and fell too early to the politics of religion and social control. Part of her story is the story of the quick shifts in political loyalty in 15th century France, which was devastated by disunity, religious disharmony, the plague, and the Hundred Years’ War. However, Jeanne d’Arc’s story cannot be told or understood without reference to the fact that she was a young, courageous, divinely inspired *woman* commander, and a *woman* victim of the chaos in France at the time. Both her physical womanhood and gender-based expectations of Jeanne d’Arc’s behaviour are prominent features even in a short retelling of the story of her life. Because she was a woman, Jeanne d’Arc had to dress in men’s clothes, and pretend to be something she was not, in order to join the military and command troops, regardless of her prowess at doing so. Because she was a woman, many French people – much like the ones who tried and ultimately killed her – believed that Jeanne was doing something unnatural and even sacrilegious dressing ‘as a man.’ Because she was a woman, Jeanne d’Arc was expected to dress as a woman and act like a woman, which excluded being a soldier; and because she was a woman, Jeanne d’Arc’s refusal to ‘act like a woman’ served as evidence of heresy at her trial.

It is tempting to discard Jeanne d’Arc’s story for a number of reasons. After all, some say, she was an anomaly as a female fighter, and even though it is clear that perceptions about her sex and expectations based on her gender played a large role in Jeanne d’Arc’s life and eventually her death, many people chalk that up to the prejudices of 15th century Europe, pointing to substantial evidence that ‘things like that’ do not happen in the ‘civilized’ world any more. What those people do not see, and what this article is written to show, is that the centrality of gender-based expectations of women who participate in wars has not disappeared with women’s increasing visibility in those conflicts. After all, as we will see later in this contribution, Jeanne d’Arc was far from the only woman who had to dress like a man to be accepted into military service – such stories can be found in many modern European wars, as well as in the American Civil War, the First and Second World Wars, and contemporary conflicts. Women’s gender remains a crucial factor in their participation in militaries around the world.

This article explores women’s presence in military forces around the world, looking both at women’s service as soldiers, and at the gendered dimensions of their soldiering particularly and of soldiering generally. It begins with an overview of the use of the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative to describe women’s relationship with war throughout history, describing women’s innocence of and abstention from war. It then points out that this stereotypical narrative often contrasted with women’s actual experiences as soldiers and fighters throughout the history of warfare. It then discusses women’s contemporary involvement in the making and fighting of wars, relating those experiences to gender-based expectations of women’s behaviour (particularly the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative) and the gendered

nature of warfare. It concludes with some insights, looking forward, for women's participation in military conflict.

Women and wars in historical perspective

Feminist scholars have consistently argued that traditional narratives about the ways that politics works are both implicitly and explicitly gendered: they exclude women and values understood to be stereotypically 'feminine.' Nancy Huston¹ first applied this observation to war and security discourses. She argued that a victorious story that people believe about a war is essential to legitimate that war and inspire people to fight in it, pay for it, and suffer for it. The plot includes the hero fighting the enemy in order to gain something important or meaningful, and winning despite long odds and extreme hardship. As Huston explained, 'it is no accident that whereas there are reams and reams of "heroic" verse, there is no such thing as "enemic" verse: in a war narrative, it is rare that anyone refers to himself as the enemy'.²

Jean Elshtain then identified the victorious story that States tell about wars as one about just warriors and 'beautiful souls'. The protagonist in the narrative is the just warrior, who is a hero because he protects (his) (innocent) women and children from the evils of the enemy. He sacrifices his time, his body, his fear, and even his life for the good of life back home. As Elshtain explained, just warriors go to war not to kill but to die for the cause.³ This story equates women with the cause men die for – the life back home. Women are at once the object of the fighting and the just purpose of the war. They are 'beautiful souls' who are (incorrectly) pacifists because they are naïve about the nature of war. The just warrior fights to protect the 'beautiful soul's' innocence and the quality of her life. War is therefore necessary because the world would be unthinkable without innocent women. Women's consent to those wars is not only irrelevant but actually undesirable; it would corrupt their innocence.

The 'beautiful soul' narrative, then, sets women up as the prizes of most wars – fragile, removed from reality, and in need of the protection provided by men.⁴ The same war stories also emphasize women's mothering, where women's identities are crucially tied to 'bearing and rearing children on the home front'.⁵

1 Nancy Huston, 'Tales of War and Tears of Women', in *Women and Men's Wars*, Judith H. Stiehm (ed.), Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1983.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 273.

3 Jean B. Elshtain, 'Sovereignty, Identity, Sacrifice', in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 1991, pp. 395–406.

4 Georg W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford University Press, Clarendon Press, translated by A. V. Miller, 1977, p. 299; Jean B. Elshtain, *Women and War*, Basic Books, New York, 1987; Jean B. Elshtain et al., 'Just War as Politics: What the Gulf War Told Us About Contemporary American Life', in *But Was It Just? Reflections on the Morality of the Persian Gulf War*, David E. Decosse (ed.), Doubleday, New York, 1992, pp. 43–60.

5 V. Spike Peterson and Anne S. Runyan, *Global Gender Issues in the New Millenium*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1999, p. 116.

‘Beautiful souls’ mother soldiers, at home and on the battlefield. They provide love and nurture, and at once serve as a support for the logistical and moral fighting for the war and as a symbol of the good and pure that requires the evil of fighting to save it. In this understanding of women’s relationships with war, there is no room for women fighting wars – they are at once fought over in war and protected from it.

Scholars have pointed out that the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative has played a substantial role in a number of international conflicts throughout history. Chivalric narratives are woven throughout many war histories. The Trojan War was fought in part over the beautiful Helen. In Thucydides’ famed account of the Peloponnesian War, the Melians’ punishment for weakness is that the men are killed, while the women and children (the spoils of war) are taken as slaves. Machiavelli, in a chapter called ‘How a State is Ruined Because of Women’ argues that the temptation of women as prizes can cause conflict.⁶ Elshtain recognized the ‘beautiful soul’ in the United States’ post-World War I debates about women’s suffrage, where anti-suffragists argued that women’s participation in decisions to make war would corrupt the purity of femininity.⁷ She also pointed out that the image of women as belonging to a sphere of peace was even prevalent in World War II, where ‘beneath her overalls, Rosie [the Riveter] was still “wearing her apron” in the expectation that demobilization would restore the *status quo ante*’.⁸ Elshtain was, even initially, quite clear that the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative extended past the two world wars. She explained that:

‘It would be unwise to assume that the combined effects of Vietnam, feminism, and the involvement of over 50 per cent of adult American women in the labor force ... undercut received webs of social meaning as these revolve around men, women, and war’.⁹

Indeed, feminist scholars have identified elements of the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative in other, more recent wars. Cynthia Enloe pointed out that, ‘if there is an image that defines television’s coverage of the [first] Gulf Crisis, it’s a disheveled white woman coming off a Boeing 747, an exhausted baby on her shoulder’.¹⁰ My own work identifies the use of the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative to describe women in both the First Gulf War and the United Nations Security Council economic sanctions regime against Iraq in the 1990s.¹¹ Spike Peterson and Anne Sisson Runyan¹² identify stereotypical images of passive and protected women as being complicit in genocide and genocidal rape in the former Yugoslavia. Across these

6 Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, p. 55.

7 J.B. Elshtain, *Women and War*, above note 4, pp. 6, 140.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

10 Cynthia Enloe, *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1993, p. 166.

11 Laura Sjöberg, *Gender, Justice, and the Wars in Iraq*, Lexington Books, Lanham, MD, 2006, p. 198.

12 V.S. Peterson and A.S. Runyan, above note 5, p. 126.

different times and cultural contexts, there are variations in the specific characteristics of the 'beautiful soul' who is the subject of wars' justificatory stories. Still, from these past empirical studies, it is possible to identify unifying characteristics of the use of the 'beautiful soul' narrative.

The 'beautiful soul' narrative can be recognized, first and foremost, by its emphasis on women's difference from men: specifically, on women's innocence and peacefulness. Related to this differentiation between characteristics traditionally associated with femininity and characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity, the 'beautiful soul' narrative can also be identified by the separation of a private sphere (where women are, and naturally belong) and the sphere of war-making and war-fighting (where something has gone terribly wrong if women are included). Third, the 'beautiful soul' narrative uses women's femininity as a justification for war and/or a reason to fight for peace. These three characteristics together can be used to find and analyse the 'beautiful soul' narrative in accounts of women's roles in wars, from ancient times to present day.

Were women 'beautiful souls'?¹³

Even as the 'beautiful soul' narrative has dominated most accounts of women's relationships with the enterprise of war, women have been (usually under the radar) soldiers, support personnel, and fighters in war throughout history. While there is hardly space for a comprehensive history of women's involvement in warfare, substantial evidence exists that women have been a part of many major conflicts where their roles have usually gone unnoticed.

Women have been involved as soldiers and fighters in most of the world's major conflicts, and, as the Jeanne d'Arc story that starts this article chronicles, this is not a uniquely modern phenomenon. In addition to well-known stories about women's participation in conflict (like the stories of the Amazons in Greek mythology, there is evidence that women participated in and/or led many ancient conquests, including many of the battles of the Shang Dynasty, the Biblical campaign in Qadesh, several battles for the British throne, the defence of Argos, the battle of Scythia, the (alleged) 3rd century BC Japanese invasion of Korea, the siege of Lacedaemon, the Peloponnesian War, the Battle of Raphia, several struggles for control of the Roman Empire, and battles to eject the Chinese from Vietnam in the 1st century AD.

In the Middle Ages, Saint Genevieve is credited with averting Attila from Paris in the 5th century AD. Priestess Hind al-Hunnud led her people in a battle against Muhammed. Muhammed's widow led his troops in the Battle of the Camel. In the 7th century, a woman named Kahina is credited with leading the Berber resistance against the Umayyad conquest of North Africa. Also in that century, Saxon women are credited with battling Charlemagne in large numbers. Many tales

13 Uncited stories in this section come from a number of collected sources over the years.

tell of Viking women's fierceness in battle. A woman named Akkadevi, an Indian princess, led a siege in the battle at Gokage. Isabel of Conches, a Norman, rode armed as a knight in the 11th century. Female Chinese general Liangyu played a large role in the Song defeat of the Jin in the 12th century. In the 13th century, Indian queen Rani Rudrama Devi led her troops into battle, and was ultimately killed fighting. Queen Margaret of Anjou commanded troops successfully in the War of the Roses.

These stories of women's participation in warfare only become more common in modern times. There was substantial participation by women fighters in the American Revolution,¹⁴ the American Civil War,¹⁵ the Mexican Revolution,¹⁶ World War I,¹⁷ the Russian Civil War,¹⁸ the Spanish Civil War,¹⁹ World War II,²⁰ the Korean War,²¹ the Vietnam War,²² the Afghan Civil War,²³ the Iran–Iraq War,²⁴ the Rwandan genocide,²⁵ the civil war in Sierra Leone,²⁶ and many others.

Women's consistent (and increasing) service to militaries, not only in supporting but also in combat capacities, stands in stark contrast to the dominant narrative of women as innocent of and protected from men's wars. Still, even when women's fighting is recognized, very often it is recognized as *women's fighting* instead of as fighting the same wars in the same ways as men. Women's agency in their soldiering is often doubted, and women's violence is associated with flaws in their femininity, maternity, physiology, or sexuality.²⁷ Still, even accounts that blame women's soldiering on flaws in their femininity maintain crucial elements of the traditional, inherited 'beautiful soul' narrative, proving that however involved women get in conflicts, they remain, to some degree, understood as the innocent

14 Elizabeth P. Ellett, *The Women of the American Revolution*, Charles Scribner, New York, 1856.

15 DeAnne Blanton and Lauren M. Cook, *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers and the American Civil War*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA, 2002.

16 Tabea A. Linhard, *Fearless Women in the Mexican Revolution and Spanish Civil War*, University of Missouri Press, Kansas City, 2005.

17 Kimberly Jensen, *Mobilizing Minerva: American Women in the First World War*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 2008.

18 W. Bruce Lincoln, *Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War, 1918–1921*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1999.

19 T.A. Linhard, above note 16.

20 Emily Yellin, *Our Mothers' War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2004.

21 Lester H. Brune, *The Korean War: Handbook of Literature and Research*, Greenwood Publishing Group, New York, 1996.

22 Judith Stiehm, *Arms and the Enlisted Woman*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1989.

23 Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Afghan Women: Identity and Invasion*. Zed Books, London, 2007.

24 Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, CO, 2003.

25 Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics*, Zed Books, London, 2007.

26 Megan MacKenzie, 'Securitization and Desecuritization: Female Soldiers and the Reconstruction of Women in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone', in *Security Studies*, Vol. 18, Issue 2, April 2009, pp. 241–261.

27 L. Sjoberg and C.E. Gentry, above note 25; Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, 'Reduced to Bad Sex: Narratives of Violent Women from the Bible to the War on Terror', in *International Relations*, Vol. 22, No. 1, March 2008, pp. 5–23.

outsiders in the making and fighting of wars. Two examples from contemporary warfare – of women soldiers in the ‘war on terror’ and of women terrorists in the last decade – betray the remnants of the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative in the reception of women warriors.

Women soldiers, the ‘war on terror’ and the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative

Far from being relegated to history as women’s fighting becomes more commonplace, the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative can be found in stories about women soldiers fighting ‘against terror’ in the ‘war on terror’. As Melisa Brittain explains:

‘Images of white female US and UK soldiers deployed in Iraq were used in the first months of the 2003 invasion as icons of female liberation to illustrate the supposed benevolence, moral superiority, and progressiveness of the west. However, at the same time that white female soldiers were held up as models of female emancipation and western benevolence, they were also presented as helpless and vulnerable in the face of the perceived threat of sexual violence on the part of Arab Men’.²⁸

When, in fact, the largest threat of sexual violence to women soldiers in Iraq came from male soldiers in their own units,²⁹ the risk of rape by Iraqi men (though not a single instance has yet been confirmed by a female victim) was emphasized in news media and military reports about the welfare of women soldiers in Iraq.³⁰

The most well-known individual story occurred early in the war, with the capture and subsequent ‘rescue’ of Private Jessica Lynch. Jessica Lynch is widely thought of as the first woman prisoner of war in the United States’ invasion of Iraq.³¹ She was, at the time, a nineteen-year-old white woman from West Virginia, serving in a combat support unit which had been in an automobile accident in the Iraqi desert. Her humvee was attacked by Iraqi troops, and several of the members of her unit were taken prisoner and/or killed.³² Lynch was taken prisoner by the Iraqi troops, and held for eleven days. The initial reports about what was happening to her described her as a potential victim of torture and rape at the hands of hypermasculine Iraqi soldiers.

28 Melisa Brittain, ‘Benevolent Invaders, Heroic Victims, and Depraved Villains: White Femininity in Media Coverage of the Invasion of Iraq’, in *(En)gendering the War on Terror*, Krista Hunt and Kim Rygiel (eds), Ashgate, London, 2006, pp. 73–96.

29 Sheila Jeffreys, ‘Double Jeopardy: Women, the US military, and the war in Iraq’, in *Women’s Studies International Forum*, Vol. 30, Issue 1, 2007, pp. 16–25.

30 Laura Sjoberg, ‘Agency, Militarized Femininity, and Enemy Others’, in *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 9, Issue 1, 2007, p. 89.

31 Shoshana Johnson, an African-American woman in Lynch’s unit, was captured at the same time, see above note 30, p. 90.

32 In fact, another woman, a Native American from Arizona, Lori Piestawa, was killed in that encounter.

In military and media reports, Lynch was characterized as brave beyond her femininity but nevertheless limited by it, needing an elaborate, public rescue.³³ Saving Private Lynch was discussed both in public discourse and official military discourse in terms of the fear that her Iraqi captors would sexually violate her. As Brittain notes, ‘most reports of Lynch’s ordeal note that she is a small-town girl from West Virginia, and that her only opportunity to get a college education was to join the army’.³⁴ Because Lynch was characterized as naïve and innocent, ‘the drama of Lynch’s capture was dwarfed only by the drama of her rescue’ which emphasized the violence that men had to perform in order to save their women.³⁵

The theme of female soldiers’ vulnerability reaches beyond stories about Jessica Lynch. A number of news reports imply or explicitly argue that there are unique risks for women soldiers who require unique protection. Hal Bernton, in the *Seattle Times*, laments that it is more difficult to protect women soldiers ‘in the unruly realm of central Iraq’, but ‘in this war, as in those that came before, the army seeks to keep female soldiers away from the front line’.³⁶ Nicholas Kristof reported on ‘the most astoundingly modern weapon in the western arsenal’ whose ‘name was Claire, and she had a machine gun in her arms and a flower in her helmet’.³⁷ The fate of women soldiers (upwards of 40% of whom are married to male soldiers) is often discussed in terms of what happens to their children if a *mother* dies in combat, implying that the loss of a mother is more serious to children than the loss of a father.³⁸

Jessica Lynch at first sight looks like a woman who is being held equal to (and even above) men. She and other female soldiers, after all, are being allowed to occupy jobs in the United States military previously reserved for men, and are being given protection from combat and from their fellow soldiers as they do so. Still, gender-stereotypical images of these women run through media, military, and academic accounts of their service. Even though they are soldiers, women who fight ‘against terror’ in the ‘war on terror’ for the United States are often characterized as innocent, in need of protection, and in need of rescue.

The first element of the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative – that women are more peaceful than men – is evident in stories of Lynch and other female soldiers in the war on terror. Lynch was constantly characterized as a ‘girl’, who had joined the army to see the world and to fulfil her goal of becoming a kindergarten teacher.³⁹ In describing Private Lynndie England, General Janis Karpinski⁴⁰ characterized her as

33 L. Sjöberg, above note 30, p. 90.

34 M. Brittain, above note 28, p. 83.

35 L. Sjöberg, above note 11, p. 193.

36 Hal Bernton, ‘Soldiers try to suppress anguish as Iraq tours are extended’, in *The Seattle Times*, 26 January 2004.

37 Nicholas Kristof, ‘A Woman’s Place’, in *New York Times*, 25 April 2003, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/US/04/25/nyt.kristof/> (last visited 5 February 2010).

38 Nancy Gibbs, ‘The Private Jessica Lynch’, in *Time*, 17 November 2003, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1006147,00.html> (last visited 5 February 2010).

39 M. Brittain, above note 28, p. 81.

40 Janis Karpinski, Personal Interview with author, Hilton Head, South Carolina. 13 October 2006.

young, weak, and naïve, implying that she was vulnerable rather than violent in her participation in the prisoner abuse in Iraq. As Hal Bernton described above, women are allowed into the United States military,⁴¹ but ‘protected’ from the front lines because of their vulnerability. Other women soldiers are often considered persons in need of protection rather than protectors, ‘beautiful soul[s] who could not escape the mold, even with a gun and a uniform’.⁴²

In the stories about American women soldiers in Iraq, there is also a private sphere that they belong to separate from the sphere of war-making and war-fighting. Reports about Jessica Lynch emphasized her (apolitical, non-violent, and traditionally feminine) reasons for joining the military, including the desire to see the world and the hope to become a kindergarten teacher. Sabrina Harmon, one of the women accused of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, has been described frequently in terms of her attraction to family units in Iraq, and her proclivity to help Iraqi women stock their refrigerators and cook in their kitchens.⁴³ Many stories⁴⁴ about the deployed female fighting force emphasize the home(front) that they left behind, expressing concern about their children’s well-being in their absence, and, much like the stories of World War II that Jean Elshtain described,⁴⁵ implying that when the war was over, they would be able to go back to the *status quo ante* of being mothers first and soldiers second, if at all. Women soldiers’ motivations are kept out of the political or war sphere in these stories, and when women are recognized as being in that sphere, their presence is described as temporary and undesirable.

The third element of the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative is that women are used as a *casus belli* – a reason to fight in the war. Melisa Brittain observes that the Jessica Lynch story was ‘designed to increase support for the invasion of Iraq and validate the continued presence of US and UK forces’.⁴⁶ At the time that Lynch was captured, the Coalition forces had taken over Baghdad, and there was a real question in the media whether the war was over, and a withdrawal was called for.⁴⁷ When Lynch was captured, however, attention turned to questions about and news of her potential rescue – because war is about protecting innocent women, and an innocent woman was a POW.⁴⁸ Jessica Lynch’s rescue ‘involved almost a dozen helicopters and several hundred soldiers’ in order to save her ‘from a horrible death’ in a hospital that contained only Lynch and the medical staff caring for her.⁴⁹ Fighting *for* Lynch, rather than seeing her as a fighter, was key to stories about

41 Perhaps, as Melisa Brittain hypothesized, as a show of cultural superiority (above note 28).

42 L. Sjöberg, above note 30, p. 86.

43 L. Sjöberg and C.E. Gentry, above note 25, p. 71.

44 E.g. N. Gibbs, above note 38.

45 J.B. Elshtain, note 4, p. 6.

46 M. Brittain, above note 28, p. 81.

47 See e.g. Anthony Shadid, ‘Baghdad Power Out for First Time in War’, in *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 4 April 2003, available at: <http://www.post-gazette.com/World/20030404baghdadwp5.asp> (last visited 5 February 2010).

48 L. Sjöberg, above note 11.

49 Barbara Ferguson, ‘Lynch Rescue was a Perfect Operation’, in *Aljazeeraah.Info News*, 5 April 2003, available at: <http://www.aljazeeraah.info/News%20archives/2003%20News%20archives/April%202003%20News/>

her – an indicator that, despite fighting in the war and being captured as a prisoner, Lynch remained, in public discourse, a ‘beautiful soul’, along with her fellow female soldiers.

Women terrorists and the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative

Women who call themselves *shakhidki* constitute a majority of the Chechen suicide bombers in the ongoing conflict between Russia and Chechnya.⁵⁰ The women suicide bombers are known more commonly by the name given to them by the Russian government, the ‘Black Widows’.⁵¹ Though these women are not only involved with the conflict, but often leaders in it, they are characterized in political, media, and academic discourses as helpless, weak, and innocent – descriptions that eerily echo the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative.

For example, one account explains that ‘when a Chechen woman’s husband is killed, she can’t marry again ... she has to put on a black mourning dress for the rest of her life. But by dying, she gets closer to her beloved. That’s why the women were so scary. They had no reason to live’.⁵² Another characterization of one of the women who held hostages at the Moscow Theatre in 2002 seems to ignore her participation in violence and focus on her femininity. The woman is described as ‘very normal’, courteous, and as someone who would ‘ask people about their children’ and ‘always say, “everything will be fine. It will finish peacefully”’.⁵³ The maternal element of the women terrorists’ motivations is also emphasized in many accounts, which portray the women as avenging the deaths of their husbands or (especially) their sons.⁵⁴

Another element in discussions of the ‘Black Widows’ is that they often portray the women suicide bombers as incapable of making their own choices to participate in terrorism and war. Groskop describes the ‘Black Widows’ as ‘pawns in a man’s game’, denying that they have any agency in their choice to fight in the war. Most stories describe the *shakhidki* as raped, drugged, or blackmailed into suicide missions.⁵⁵ Other narratives are careful to distinguish real or normal

5%20news/Lynch%20Rescue%20Was%20a%20Perfect%20Operation%20aljazeera.info.htm (last visited 5 February 2010); L. Sjöberg, above note 11.

50 Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova, ‘Black Widows: The Chechen Female Suicide Terrorists’, in Y. Schweitzer, *Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality?*, Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv, 2006, pp. 63–80.

51 N.P. Walsh, ‘Sisters in Arms’, in *The Guardian*, 1 September 2005, p. 6.

52 Mark MacDonald, ‘“Black Widows” remain mysterious one year after Moscow theater siege’, in *Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service*, 22 October 2003.

53 Viv Groskop, ‘Women at the Heart of the Terror Cells’, in *The Guardian*, 5 September 2004, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/chechnya/Story/0,1297692,00.html> (last visited 5 February 2010).

54 A. Speckhard and K. Akhmedova, above note 50, p. 67.

55 In their extensive empirical study of Chechen women suicide bombers, Speckhard and Akhmedova found no evidence of this style of coercion. They explained that ‘we find strong evidence of self-recruitment and strong willingness to martyr oneself on behalf of one’s country’ (above note 50, p. 70). See also Viv Groskop, ‘Chechnya’s Deadly Black Widows’, in *The New Statesman*, 6 September 2004; N.P. Walsh, above note 51, p. 6; S.L. Myers, ‘Young, Female, and Carrying a Bomb’, in *The International*

women⁵⁶ from women who participate in terror, who are ‘fanatical’,⁵⁷ ‘warped’, ‘mad beasts’.⁵⁸

The Russian government has (effectively) used the purported victimization of Chechen women suicide terrorists to its political advantage in the conflict. During the first war for Chechen independence, ‘Russian and Chechen women together vocalized objections to the fighting, vilifying the military and pointing out that the most frequent victims of the conflict were simple soldiers and innocent civilians’.⁵⁹ The Russian government, however, has been able to break up this alliance effectively by portraying the Chechens as monsters for drugging and selling (their) women into suicide terrorism.⁶⁰ Partly as a result of these characterizations, Russian popular support for the second conflict in Chechnya has been substantially higher.

In the Middle East, very different women in very different conflicts find themselves portrayed in very similar ways. Women make up around 7% of Palestinian suicide bombers, and less than 1% of suicide bombers in Iraq.⁶¹ Women in the Palestinian resistance movement are often characterized as being manipulated either by family members or family tragedy into joining the movement.⁶² As Mia Bloom observed, female suicide bombers in Palestine are often ‘portrayed as the chaste wives and mothers of the revolution’.⁶³ She explains that Wafa Idris (the first Palestinian woman suicide bomber) was characterized in one newspaper as a ‘bride of heaven’, while another described her bombing in terms of the Virgin Mary, ‘from Mary’s womb issued a Child who eliminated oppression, while the body of Wafa became shrapnel that eliminated despair and aroused hope’.⁶⁴

Middle Eastern women’s dependence on men has also been a theme of discussions about their motivations for committing suicide terrorism. Divorce,⁶⁵

Herald Tribune, 8 August 2003; Bridget Conley, ‘For the Women of Chechnya, Hope Dies Last’, in *Journal of Human Rights*, Vol. 3, No. 3, September 2004, p. 340.

56 L. Sjoberg and C.E. Gentry, above note 25, p. 31.

57 Ian Bruce, ‘Special Force Has Unenviable Record’, in *The Herald*, 3 September 2004.

58 Owen Matthews, ‘So Warped by Hate, They Will Kill Anyone To Take Revenge Against Russia’, in *The Daily Mail*, 4 September 2004, p. 8.

59 L. Sjoberg and C.E. Gentry, above note 25, p. 115; Galina Eremitcheva and Elena Zdravomyslova, ‘Die Bewegung der Soldatenmütter – Eine zivilgesellschaftliche Initiative. Der Fall St Petersburg’, in Martina Ritter (ed), *Zivilgesellschaft und Gender-Politik in Russland*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2001, p. 232.

60 Maya Eichler, ‘A Gendered Analysis of the Chechen Wars’, in *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 8, No. 4, December 2006, pp. 486–511; Peter Baker, ‘“New Stage” of Fear for Chechen Women’, in *Washington Post*, 19 October 2004, p. A12, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A43296-2004Oct18?language=printer> (last visited 8 February 2010).

61 L. Sjoberg and C.E. Gentry, above note 25, p. 113.

62 Julie Peteet, *Gender in Crisis: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1991, p. 119; Karla J. Cunningham, ‘Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism’, in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2003, p. 184.

63 Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005, p. 56.

64 *Ibid.*, pp. 56–57.

65 Barbara Victor, *An Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers*, Rodale Press, New York, 2003, p. 41.

loss of family members,⁶⁶ adultery,⁶⁷ and motherhood⁶⁸ have all been popular explanations for women's participation in suicide terrorism in Palestine and Iraq. In fact, 'the language of domesticity and motherhood are particularly strong regarding Palestinian and Al Qaeda female suicide terrorists'.⁶⁹

Stories about women who commit suicide terrorism in the Middle East also deny women's agency in their violent actions and separate violent women from 'real' or 'normal' women. The women have been characterized as 'twisted, horrible women' who let down their families by engaging in actual violence rather than supporting the violence of their men.⁷⁰ They are told of as monstrous, warped, and having lost their connection to normal or real women and femininity.⁷¹

That women engage in self-martyrdom has been a rallying cry in each conflict, especially in the Israeli-Palestinian case. For example, opponents of the Palestinian cause have published statements like: 'what kind of men use women to hide behind...?', and 'almost certainly, the Palestinian terrorist organizations will continue to take advantage of the innocent appearance of women to carry out terrorist attacks', proving there are no limits to the Palestinians' tactics.⁷² On the other hand, from the Palestinian side of the conflict, the fact that innocent women need to participate in suicide terrorism shows just how hopeless and unjust the situation of Palestinians is.⁷³

One would expect that stories of women suicide bombers would be the last place that the 'beautiful soul' narrative could be found. After all, women suicide bombers appear to be the opposite of the peaceful, innocent, and withdrawn women that the 'beautiful soul' narrative centres on – they are the threat from which 'innocent' civilians need protection, rather than the people in need of protection.⁷⁴ Still, despite the participation of these women in a particularly brutal sort of conflict, all three elements of the 'beautiful soul' narrative can be detected in media and academic depictions of their behaviour. First, the stories of women

66 Michael Rubin, 'Who is Responsible for the Taliban', in *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 6, No. 1, March 2002.

67 Claudia Brunner, 'Female Suicide Bombers – Male Suicide Bombing? Looking for Gender in Reporting the Suicide Bombings of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict', in *Global Society*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2005, p. 34.

68 Tery Toles Patkin, 'Explosive Baggage: Female Palestinian Suicide Bombers and the Rhetoric of Emotion', in *Women and Language*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2004, pp. 79–88; Stephen Farrell, 'Grandmother Blows Herself Up in Gaza', in *The Times Online*, 24 November 2006, available at: http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article648206.ece (last visited 8 February 2010).

69 L. Sjöberg and C.E. Gentry, above note 25, p. 125.

70 S. Farrell, above note 68.

71 L. Sjöberg and C.E. Gentry, above note 27.

72 Quotes respectively taken from: 'Female Palestinian Homicide Bomber', in *Jihadi du Jour*, 7 November 2006, available at: <http://jihadidujour.blogspot.com/2006/11/female-palestinian-homicide-bomber.html> (last visited 9 February 2010); Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The Exploitation of Palestinian Women for Terrorism*, 18 April 2002, available at: http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/2000_2009/2002/4/The%20Exploitation%20of%20Palestinian%20Women%20for%20Terroris (last visited 9 February 2010).

73 Tim McGirk, 'Palestinian Moms Becoming Martyrs', in *Time*, 3 May 2007, available at: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1617542,00.html> (last visited 8 February 2010).

74 L. Sjöberg and C.E. Gentry, above note 25, p. 2.

suicide bombers emphasize women's peacefulness in a number of ways: by distinguishing violent women from normal women, by denying women's agency in their violence, by emphasizing the importance of mothering by female suicide bombers, and by (in the Chechen case) the characterization of even willing female terrorists as more peaceful and humane than men.

Second, we can see the separation of the private sphere (where women belong) and the sphere of war in several facets of these stories. Many stories isolate the private sphere (husbands, children, and/or personal honour) as women's motivation to self-martyr, rather than any actual involvement in the sphere of war and/or the politics of the conflict. These characterizations are often accompanied by the strong implication that there is a clear separation between crazy women (who would martyr themselves) and real or normal women (who remain pure 'beautiful souls'). In addition, stories that support women suicide bombers often mourn that the conflict has become *so bad* that women must leave the private sphere in order to participate in the conflict, implying (as Elshstain pointed out above) that the just result of the conflict would allow women to return to their peaceful, innocent, and naïve lives at home. Finally, many stories that oppose women's self-martyrdom frame the 'use' of a woman as a suicide bomber as being of particular horror, because women's proper role remains in the private sphere.

The third element of the 'beautiful soul' narrative is the appropriation of 'beautiful souls' as a reason to fight in the conflict. As noted above, the Russian government uses the alleged use and abuse of Chechen women suicide bombers as a call to arms. Similarly, those on the Israeli side of the conflict with Palestinians often measure the barbarity of their enemy by what they 'do to' (their) women in terms of allowing (and allegedly forcing) them to participate in suicide terrorism. Despite their (as the empirical evidence suggests, often willing) decision to explode themselves in an effort to kill others, women suicide bombers are often portrayed in a similar light to the 'beautiful souls' that Elshstain and even Hegel identify from tens or even hundreds of years ago – as innocent, naïve, fragile, at home in the private sphere, and worth fighting to defend.

Women soldiers in the 21st century

As women become more integrated into state militaries and non-state fighting forces, significant barriers to their 'equal' participation remain. As I have mentioned before, women do not join military organizations that have suddenly become gender-neutral in response to their presence.⁷⁵ Instead, women join military groups with decades, maybe even hundreds of years, of history as masculinized organizations guided by men and values associated with masculinity. Throughout history, women participating in wars have had to hide their femininity by dressing like men, meet the physical standards of manliness along with the social standards

75 L. Sjöberg, above note 30.

of femininity, and deal with other double standards and stereotypical understandings of women’s capacities and ‘proper place’.

Feminist theorists have repeatedly identified the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative as a fundamental part of discourses justifying the making and fighting of wars.⁷⁶ Though feminist scholars have identified the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative as present in most (if not all) modern conflicts,⁷⁷ it has been suggested that the changing nature of warfare, along with women’s increasing participation in conflicts (as part of state militaries, as well as in non-state revolutionary forces and terrorist groups) would be likely to diminish the prevalence of the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative.⁷⁸ It seems logical, then, that narratives of just citizen-warriors defending passive ‘beautiful souls’ would dissipate in the wake of the disappearance of state-centric wars and the active roles that women are playing in contemporary warfare.

This article, however, has demonstrated that many uses of the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative to describe women who commit military or terrorist violence skew or ignore observable patterns in women’s behaviour. Women who engage in violence, are politically active, and frequent the public sphere are described in terms that frame them as innocent, withdrawn, peaceful, apolitical, and without agency in their choices.

The consistency of this narrative even as women’s roles in war-making and war-fighting resonate with it less has two possible explanations: first, it could be residue from decades, and even centuries, of the perception that women were the pure, innocent victims of war who need protection from it;⁷⁹ second, it could be that there is something that fundamentally links the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative and the justification of modern warfare. While the first explanation probably has some influence, this article suggests that it is fruitful to consider the possibility of the second, in order to understand both the meaning of war and the meaning of gender in global politics.

Earlier in this article, we discussed Nancy Huston’s⁸⁰ argument that a victorious narrative about a war is key to a belligerent’s ability to justify the war and rally the resources and troops needed to fight it. Jean Elshtain then contended that each belligerent’s victorious narrative about war included a story about brave, just (masculine) citizen-warriors rescuing or protecting pure, innocent (feminine) ‘beautiful souls’.⁸¹ If, as Huston argues, a victorious narrative has been key to the practice of all war, and as Elshtain argues, in practice, these victorious narratives

76 J.B. Elshtain, above note 4, p. 43.

77 Laura Sjöberg, ‘The Gendered Realities of the Immunity Principle: Why Gender Analysis Needs Feminism’, in *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 4, p. 891.

78 L. Sjöberg and C.E. Gentry, above note 25, p. 3.

79 This is not to say that women are not still disproportionately affected by war; quite the contrary, most of war’s humanitarian effects, in the short and long term, still affect women differently (and often more severely) than men. It is only to argue two things: first, there is no trade-off between victimhood and agency; second, women do not now and have not ever fitted into the neat mould that the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative frames for them.

80 N. Huston, above note 1.

81 J.B. Elshtain, above note 4.

have relied on differentiated gender roles to sustain them, then the practice of war itself could be seen to rely on differentiated gender ideal-types. In this understanding, the 'beautiful soul's presence is crucial both to wars and their justificatory narratives. 'Beautiful souls' require protection; the protection of the feminine can then be read as a crucial cause of war. The images of femaleness in the gender-stereotypical 'beautiful soul' narrative, then, simultaneously enable war and subordinate women.

If this reading of the 'beautiful soul' narrative is correct, it will not disappear as the nature of war changes and women's roles in conflict evolve. Instead, violence and protection are not opposites, but complementary concepts that necessitate each other: protection requires violence; violence requires protection. Without the 'beautiful soul' to protect, the just warrior has nothing to excuse (his) fighting, and the justificatory narratives behind the making and fighting of wars are stalled without their victorious conclusion. There is, then, theoretical and empirical leverage to be gained by considering mutual constitution of gender stereotypes and war. If the 'beautiful soul' narrative is central to war, and war is central to the building and maintenance of the 'beautiful soul' narrative, gender is a lynchpin of war-making, and the war system is a lynchpin of gender subordination. If and to the extent that the above three examples of the 'beautiful soul' narrative in the 21st century demonstrate such a relationship, it is clear that neither is going anywhere in the near future.

Given this, it is easy to understand why, while several militaries have developed policies specifically aimed at the integration of women into their ranks,⁸² those policies have not generally reached the level of 'mainstreaming' gender in military organizations.⁸³ In addition to formal restrictions on which military roles women can fill,⁸⁴ and a perceived glass ceiling on women's advancement in militaries,⁸⁵ women enter a military that has transformed its 'gender balance' while paying 'little attention to the discursive and performative elements of gender dichotomies'.⁸⁶ The result has been 'the preservation of the discursive structures of gender-subordination even in gender-integrated militaries'.⁸⁷ Though women increasingly fight in wars, they often get caught in a gender-stereotype catch-22: they

82 Judith Stiehm, *Its Our Military Too! Women and the US Military*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1996; Francine D'Amico and Laurie Weinstein, *Gender Camouflage: Women and the US Military*, New York University Press, New York, 1999; Rachel Woodward and Trish Winter, *Sexing the Soldier: The Politics of Gender and the Contemporary British Army*, Routledge, New York and London, 2007.

83 Jacqui True and Michael Mintrom, 'Transnational Networks and Policy Diffusion: The Case of Gender Mainstreaming', in *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 45, No. 1, 2001, pp. 27–57; Sylvia Walby, 'Measuring Women's Progress in a Global Era', in *International Social Science Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 184, 2005, pp. 371–387.

84 Shannon L. Holland, 'Representations of Jessica Lynch and the Controversy Regarding Women in Combat', in *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 92, No. 1, 2006, pp. 27–50.

85 Barbara Palmer and Dennis Michael Simon, *Breaking the Political Glass Ceiling: Women and Congressional Elections*, Routledge, London and New York, 2008.

86 L. Sjöberg, above note 30.

87 *Ibid.*

take all of the risks that men do, while missing both the reward and the elusive status of equality. All the while, elements of the old civilian ‘beautiful soul’ narrative remain dominant in accounts of women who share both the responsibility and the cost of fighting wars.

‘Gender mainstreaming’, a policy of the consideration of the gender-based impacts of each particular choice made by a government or an organization, has become a popular antidote to gender-subordinating institutional structures in global politics, being adopted by the United Nations Security Council, many other UN bodies, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and several governments around the world. Perhaps it is time to ask what a ‘gender mainstreamed’ experience for female soldiers would look like, rather than what it looks like when women are added to militaries with pre-existing value structures biased towards men, masculine ways of thinking, and traits associated with masculinity. There are those that would argue that a ‘gender mainstreamed’ state or non-state fighting force might be a contradiction in terms, since recognizing the gender-differential impacts of the making and fighting of wars would require turning away from war. Still, others would suggest that the lives and stories of women soldiers would be substantially different if gender considerations were at the forefront of military policy choices.

Perhaps ‘gender-mainstreamed’ militaries would recognize women’s agency in their fighting,⁸⁸ elements of both the personal and political in soldiers’ motives to fight,⁸⁹ military policies which disproportionately affect women while appearing gender neutral (such as haircut rules),⁹⁰ intrusions of the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative into the professional lives of women soldiers,⁹¹ the persistent problem of sexual violence in militaries,⁹² the masculinism inherent in weapons discourses,⁹³ the gendered nature of states’ wartime posturing,⁹⁴ and other places where the gendered nature of war and gender-based expectations of women soldiers’ behaviour combine to continue a trend of gender subordination surrounding women’s soldiering – even as women have always had, and continue to have in increasing numbers, important fighting roles in wars and conflicts.

88 L. Sjöberg and C.E. Gentry, above note 25.

89 E.g. J.B. Elshtain, above note 4.

90 See e.g. Janis Karpinski and Steven Strasser, *One Woman’s Army: The Commanding General of Abu Ghraib Tells Her Story*, Miramax Books, New York, 2005.

91 L. Sjöberg, above note 30.

92 Terri Spahr Nelson, *For Love of Country: Confronting Rape and Sexual Harassment in the US Military*, Routledge, New York and London, 2002.

93 Carol Cohn, ‘Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals’, in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 1987.

94 Jennifer Heeg Maruska, ‘When are states hypermasculine?’, in *Gender and International Security: Feminist Perspectives*, by Laura Sjöberg (ed.), Routledge, New York, 2009, pp. 235–255.