

Review Article

The Imperial Feminist: Beautiful Face of American War Machine

Jennifer Greenburg, *At War with Women, Military Humanitarianism and Imperial Feminism in an era of Permanent War*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023, 282pp, INR 2753

Paige Whaley Eager, *Waging US Military Women in Afghanistan and Iraq*, London: Routledge, 2016, 232p, INR 3342

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Reviewer Profile

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As wars and armed conflicts rage across the planet, our screens show women leaders spinning the narratives of war and empire and rejecting appeals for peaceful negotiated settlements. This is the face of 'liberal feminism' which has contributed to the individual empowerment of many women. Simultaneously feminists are analyzing how the military industrial-state complexes are co-opting women as their liberal face. But first a brief summing up of the journey of women in war and peace.

The women's movement struggled to pass Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) to push for women's equal participation in peace and security negotiations and made a case for women's political representation. This Resolution rested on the argument that peace is more sustainable and holistic if women are at the negotiating table. The resolution and women's work around it resulted in women joining several peace tables and many armies opening their doors to women soldiers. As women joined armies, they have cracked glass ceilings to become combatants.

The ideas of 1325 and women's participation in politics are confronted with a host of questions such as - how congruent is the idea of peace with war and the culture of militarism? How do we demarcate feminist peace from 'militarized feminism'? How do we assess a 'liberal feminism' which empowers the individual women to be part of an interventionist army and an imperial project? Does militarization, theoretically contradict the very idea of feminism?

Women in militaries is not a new project but the nature of women's roles in militaries has been changing. Women have had different relations with militaries in historical time, from essentially relational – being wife, daughter or mother of military men; to serving in logistics, care giving and 'handling' women counter insurgents. Women have been stereotyped as essentially peaceful and embodying the 'honor' of their communities, and thereby being victimized/ raped on account of this embodiment. There is significant research on these aspects. Even while women in many regions remain slotted in the above stereotypes, women in other parts of the world have secured more choices because of women's collective struggles for equality.

Two books each with very distinct and clearly different framing look at these questions backed up by painstaking research focused on the experiences of women soldiers in the US military during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Eager's research is during the period when women were enlisted but banned from direct combat operations. Her focus is to recount and interpret the life and death experience of female service personnel in the US Army during these wars. Her conclusions are

that notwithstanding all the pain (and pleasure)- the violence of the combat experience, trauma and the death of fellow colleagues, women in the army did empower themselves and pave the way for the agency of others.

Thousands of American women served in Iraq and Afghan wars, over a hundred were killed and many suffered injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Both books rely on extensive research, intensive interviews, observations and readings. Both use the basic approach of feminist frameworks of women seeking equality in all spheres of work and life. The narratives examine the complexity of how women experience masculinity and patriarchy from fellow soldiers as also cooperation and support from their colleagues. Both authors talk of how women in the militaries are perceived and perceive themselves, and their own understanding of personal struggles and achievements. Both researchers, however, adopt very divergent feminist paradigms based on women's relationship with the hierarchies, benefits and outcomes of state, military and imperial power.

Eager's book written nearly a decade earlier was motivated by the unprecedented roles assumed by female service personnel in America's two long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which fundamentally challenged the dominant and patriarchal social constructions of terms such as soldier, veteran, and war casualty as well as the understanding of what is a combat role. The book uses diverse feminist perspectives in international relations theory to provide an analytical leverage to capture the theoretical and empirical complexities of the lives of enlisted women in the U.S. armed forces who died in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. Through a scholarly engagement with autobiographical narratives, Eager shows that the "obstacles female soldiers have faced and continue to endure are exemplary of the gendered nature of warfare and the gendered hierarchies of the military as a sociological institution" (Eager 2014, 184).

Greenburg deconstructs the hegemonic, militarist American military system of coopting women into war projects. Her research is located in the sites where the US uses its financial and military power to maintain hegemony that has resulted in wars of intervention, occupation and the weaponization of development and humanitarianism. In essence, Greenburg's project unpacks how militarized women are the face and agents of imperial hegemony.

Greenburg shows how military women's roles became more diverse and useful during the Afghan and Iraq wars through US military programs of 'female engagement teams' (FET). In the US wars in Afghanistan, women soldiers 'engaged' Afghan women in villages as they gave positive messages to these women while gathering intelligence that might be strategically useful. The military women were given 'gendered essentialist' tasks of addressing emotional and care issues of Afghan women and children in US occupied villages.

During the Iraq war military women were consigned to the ‘winning hearts and minds’ (WHAM) programs that gained them entry into Iraqi homes and in securing civilian support. In a way, women’s usefulness in these US military interventions coupled with the demand for equal responsibility, led to shifts in US military thinking. Subsequently the US military incorporated women into the last male dominated bastion of combat roles, and created all women counter insurgency teams like the Army Rangers and Green Berets.

Greenburg raises the theoretical question of feminist debates – does coopting women into military roles defeat the idea of feminism, which in essence is opposed to the politics of militarization? Greenburg discusses this contradiction wherein feminists have struggled for equality and the entry of women in all roles and positions, in all professions along with their male counterparts. Accordingly, the US military has accepted the principle of gender equality and gradually opened combat divisions for women’s entry, giving rise to what Greenburg calls the “new imperial feminism” through which women understand themselves to be global ambassadors of women’s rights, while at the same time advancing the goals of imperialist policies.

Greenburg builds from other feminist analyses like those of Cynthia Enloe and Chandra Mohanty, to argue that the project of imperial feminism rests upon the shoulders of liberal feminists that forged the idea of permanent war as they backed the post 9/11 forever wars of the US and remained uncritical of imperialism. Liberal feminism focuses on economic and political equality between men and women within capitalist systems, and within a context in which ‘feminism’ is the understanding that ‘gender as a basis for sexual rights’ provides equality. Greenburg argues that liberal feminism makes Third World women the ‘other’, providing justification for the imposition of Western women’s choices on this ‘other’.

Liberal feminists see colonialist/imperialist wars as a means for women’s liberation. American foreign policy extends the view of liberal feminists whereby the Afghan war was justified in the name of women’s rights. Liberal feminists do not relate to the understanding of gender in relation to race and/or class as part of a broader liberation struggle. They view women’s inclusion in combat roles as a milestone on a progressive march towards universal women’s equality.

Greenburg’s central thesis explains imperial feminism as an integral part of the reconstruction of gender inclusion. She shows how this has become central to the broader operationalization of US hegemony and its redefinition of post-World War II imperialism. Greenburg provides evidence to this claim by first detailing US counterinsurgency practices assembled through military doctrines, and second, by revealing how cadets and officers are trained in military academies and on the field. These US military doctrines are based on a combination of the legacy of British colonial methods with latter day practices of the US military derived from the experience of soldiers and contractors in their ‘hot wars’ as well as Cold War histories. Counter-insurgency (COIN) traces its lineage to colonial experiences and Greenburg cites the strong continuity of colonial experiences to modern

COIN warfare. The tactic and strategy are based on the lessons learnt from colonial power and instruction. The texts used include those used during the period like the ‘Small Wars Manual’ (1900) which was used in several US invasions of select Latin American regions like the Dominican Republic (1916-1924) and Haiti (1915-1934).

She explains that insurgencies are nurtured in households and so the homestead is the site of counter insurgency operations and everyone at home can become a military target. Earlier counter insurgency operators barged indiscriminately into homes and women and children became targets. This led to accusations of human rights abuses. This approach changed after women joined as combatants in COIN. Greenburg says that from seeing women as sexual distraction, women counter insurgents became key for surveillance and intelligence, since it was easier for them to get access to homes. So, women’s ‘emotional labor’ gets commodified and used for this tactic. In sum, the US military has taken ‘a cultural turn’ by using women compatriots to penetrate civilian populations. Women combatants also are adept at weaponizing humanitarian and population centric assistances.

Greenburg and Eager both show that female soldiers have become emblems of feminist liberation and part of American cultural values. Greenburg’s extensive field work involved attending courses and interacting with various units like the Marine Corps who were training for District Stability Frameworks (DSFs), and subsequently would be posted in villages where there are counter insurgency operations. Women combatants are also good agents for civil mandates like post war reconstruction.

The chapters on military training where Greenburg examines the training and the parenting of recruits provides evidence that gender/ race/ethnicity stereotypes remain embedded in the training of cadets in significant ways. So, soldiers shape their thinking “through gendered lens that ultimately reinforced conventional associations of combat with masculinity.” DSF training imparts a lens of “faltering imperial hegemony” (Greenberg 2023, 100). In the highest echelons of military training where mainly senior military officers’ complete masters in strategic studies, in classes where they are lectured on war experiences, the ideas are straight out of British tactics in Malaya and other colonial wars, that form useful lessons from the past on innovative ways to control populations. Similarly, lessons gained from the wars in Vietnam, Philippines and other US military interventions are added to British colonial experience to form the backbone of current military training discourse and reveal the continuum of colonial methodologies to contemporary military strategies.

Greenburg analyses, that in these lectures the brutal methodologies of these wars are presented purely as technical exercises in population control and “successes” in COIN. She observes that most military instructors laid aside the known brutalities of Vietnam like the Mai Lai massacres and focused instead on war as science. (As if science has no ethics) In lectures on

gender, the cadets are taught the importance of motherhood in traditional societies and why women operatives are important assets in COIN. Manuals like “Guide to Female Engagement Teams” used in the Afghanistan war, where access to local women became a key to acquiring intelligence, is one such example.

By unearthing US military counter insurgency doctrines Greenburg shows how these seeded liberal feminist ideas intertwined with militarism. She peels off the changes and new additions in military counterinsurgency manuals that reveal cultural and gendered counter insurgencies’ histories. Greenburg makes an important connection between how “military social work” engages with NGOs and development agencies (USAID), and how closely these are linked with military bases and how these institutions see their role as “civilizing” and “civilianizing” the military’s death wielding capacity. Greenburg thus establishes the links of military humanitarianism with entrenched racial evolutionism as well as the association of combat with masculinity. Women are trained to think and act as ‘models’ of ‘imperial benevolence’.

Greenburg makes significant contribution to feminist understanding on the subject of ‘women’s emotional labor’. She builds from Sara Ruddick’s (1990) arguments on maternal thinking where women’s emotions develop through parenting and then women relate to peace movements because of their roles as mothers and parents. Greenburg provides substantial evidence to show how women continue to be viewed as the ‘emotional gender’ and were so useful for searching, calming, and collecting intelligence from Afghan civilians.

To reinforce her work, Greenburg studies the work of the ‘lionesses’ women teams during the Iraq war. The Lionesses were assigned to go into Iraqi households. US army trained women for cultural support teams and the Lionesses program in accordance with field related operational needs. They make up the Female Engagement Teams (FETs). Greenburg also deconstructs the race and language of ‘military multiculturalism’. The military argues for diversity as racial diversity allows special operations, smoother integration especially into ‘hotspots’. After all, most US wars are based in regions of ‘cultural backwardness’ that justify interventions. These FET and lionesses are projected as ambassadors for women’s rights. These teams are encouraged to include women of color since this assists in the task of US army women ‘saving brown women from brown men’. So, this new imperial feminism consolidates gender and racial repression among military ranks with a racial evolutionism that imagines the subjects of occupation.

After reading journals kept by some members of these FETs, Greenburg concludes that their narrative begins to assemble an imperialist feminist framework. These FET women imagine themselves as service women, as models of Western liberation who can “enlighten” the imagined Afghan woman into supporting the counter insurgency and liberating herself to be similar to a western woman. This is another significant aspect of new imperial feminism. Within such a construction, these military tasks and violence can be justified. The agenda of women’s rights is now held together with the violence they perpetrate. This violence is perpetrated during military

occupation during home raids. Violence also is being perpetrated when FET members are denied veteran benefits, and are physically and sexually abused within the military.

Greenburg convincingly shows how gendered warfare continues in different forms. Military roles have expanded to strengthen new institutional linkages between the defense and development sectors. Military feminism defines women soldiers through gender essentialism such as emotions, calm, care etc. and military femininity is defined through emotional labor. In sum, imperial feminism frames female soldiers as models of liberal empowerment in contrast to for example oppressed Afghan women. It prizes white femininity.

Both these books are important readings for students and analysts of gender, militaries, and political culture. Eager's book is important for the records and insights she provides of women who served in the US military during two wars. Greenburg's work is a major contribution to feminist understanding of many aspects of the women, war, peace debate. It contributes to deconstructing US hegemony and the culture of militarism which pervades us all.

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