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Jessica Trisko Darden. "Assessing the significance of women in combat roles."

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Reviewed by **Kerry Crawford**, James Madison University

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Discussions of gender in war have traditionally defaulted to the women-as-civilians/men-as-combatants dichotomy, but recent research has worked to debunk false and overly simplified assumptions about women and men in war.¹ Jessica Trisko Darden succinctly assesses the state of the field and highlights promising directions for future research on the significance of women in combat.

There is no shortage of literature and discussion centered on women's victimization in war or their role as peacemakers. Combatant women, however, remain fairly invisible in comparison. Trisko Darden observes

¹ A few notable examples are R. Charli Carpenter, "Women and Children First: Gender, Norms, and Humanitarian Evacuation in the Balkans 1991-95," *International Organization* 57(4), 2003: 661-694; Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, and Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics*. (New York: Zed Books 2007); Annica Kronsell and Erika Svedburg, eds. *Making Gender, Making War* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Megan MacKenzie. *Beyond the Band of Brothers: The US Military and the Myth That Women Can't Fight* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

that to the extent that combatant women are made visible in the media, policy discussions, and academic literature, their stories are sensationalized or their presence is examined as an obstacle to operational success.

A clear understanding of the roles and significance of women in combat is hampered by the fact that today's asymmetric wars, which involve shifting alliances among state and non-state actors and are fought in areas populated by civilians, are not characterized by clear battle lines and easy distinctions between combatants and noncombatants. Whenever states, humanitarians, or scholars attempt to track war's impact on civilians they do so through blunt categorizations that place women and children in the same group: noncombatants (457). When war is complex, analyses of it attempt to simplify by using any means possible, and defaulting to the gendered distinction between combatant and civilian is one way to do so. Still, the historical record, and Trisko Darden's reading of it, tells us that women are more than capable of serving as combatants in state and non-state militaries alike.

The acknowledgement that women can—and do—serve in armed forces leads to necessary and unanswered questions, which Trisko Darden enumerates. Women, like men, participate in armed conflict for any number of reasons linked to their socio-economic opportunities (or lack thereof), ethnicity, race, religion, nationality, political beliefs, or other affiliations. We can only hope to understand why women fight if we take into account the intersections of gender with the other salient identities women possess. Gender identity is not the sum total of a person; nevertheless, it is an important variable that security scholars should make more of an effort to address.

Security studies scholars, Trisko Darden argues, should engage and seek to answer a series of questions about gender in war. Her questions relate to the experiences of women personally and their roles in post-war society as well as to strategic concerns about military structure and operational effectiveness. Regarding women and society, what happens to combatant women after active hostilities have ended? Men and women are not afforded equal access to demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration resources, as the latter are presumed to be peacemakers and are often left to reintegrate into civil society on their own. Beyond the immediate post-war reintegration challenge, there is still very little understanding of how experiences in combat might shape women's roles in post-conflict society more broadly.

More traditional, state-centered security concerns relate easily to the second set of questions about military structure and operational effectiveness. Does the integration of women into state militaries have an impact on combat outcomes? Related to this, the observation that women have been able to integrate more easily into non-state military forces leads to questions about the role of ideology and command structure in diversifying armed forces.

An additional aspect of gender in war that academics and practitioners would do well to consider is the complexity of gender itself. If combatant women have been neglected in academic research and policy discussions, then individuals who do not fit neatly within the categories of 'women' and 'men' are profoundly more so. The Pentagon's recent announcement about the effort to remove the barriers to transgender military service underscores the fact that 'gender' is not synonymous with 'women'.² Although the binary

² See Matthew Rosenberg. 13 July 2015. "Pentagon Moves to Allow Transgender People to Serve Openly in the Military." *The New York Times*. Available: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/14/us/pentagon-plan-would-let-transgender-people-serve-openly.html?_r=0. Accessed 22 September 2015.

categorization of individuals as men and women lends itself to simpler discussions, it does not represent the full range of individuals who participate in and are affected by war. Within the confines of feasibility, scholars and practitioners should attempt to engage the complexities of gender and its intersections with culture, religion, ethnicity, race, nationality, and class in war and the post-conflict period.

Trisko Darden gives the security studies community—inside and outside of the academy—a lot to think about concerning the significance of combatant women and the role of gender in the structure of armed forces. Her questions provide the outline for what promises to be a meaningful and important research program, especially as the world seeks to understand twenty-first century wars, counterinsurgencies, and extremist movements. Examining the roles and significance of combatant women is not just about women; gender is a relational phenomenon that both arises from, and shapes, cultural and social norms in society. Understanding the motivations, effectiveness, and fate of combatant women leads to a better understanding of society as a whole.

Kerry Crawford is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at James Madison University. She received her Ph.D. in political science from George Washington University in 2014. Crawford is currently completing a book manuscript on international political efforts to respond to sexual violence in armed conflict. Her other research interests include women in peacekeeping, civilian casualties in war, and human security. Dr. Crawford's research has been published in *Gender and Development*, *Armed Forces & Society*, and *Air and Space Power Journal*.

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