

GENDER AND LEADERSHIP IN THE MILITARY

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Abstract: Since time immemorial, the world has known female soldiers and warriors. Some very brave women have gone down the annals of history for their heroic acts in the military of their individual countries. However, one thing still stands clear the achievements of the previous female generations notwithstanding – the role of the female soldier, especially in combat remains a highly controversial subject. Several arguments have been advanced for the exclusion of female soldiers in real combat and other senior military positions in some countries. These arguments range from what many consider as sexism to what qualifies as serious food for thought worth exploring. It is really interesting that inasmuch as the emancipation of women is much evident in other careers, their ability is highly doubted when it comes to most militaries in the world. This paper discusses the role of women and the obstacles they face all over the world in their attempts at military leadership.

Keywords: female, soldier, military, leadership, role of women, model, gender, femininity.

1 INTRODUCTION

There is no denying that most world militaries would never trust a female to sit at the helm. Despite the great advances made at promoting equality in the workplace, the military still largely remains a man's zone where women struggle to prove their worth.

In fact, there are very many militaries in the world where the role of a female soldier is mainly restricted to clerical and other logistical roles¹. They are thought as subordinate staff where civilians wouldn't be the appropriate choice and their role in most militaries is just cosmetic.

2 LEADERSHIP CONCEPT AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE MILITARY

It is very important to understand what leadership entails before embarking on understanding why female leadership in the military is such a controversial subject. Scholars have advanced various leadership concepts for so many years because leadership is considered complex and has so many facets that cannot be measured. Most people will define leadership as "the act of motivating others to work towards organization goals"². It is a fact that leadership requires a complex set of skills and this is the sole reason why all of us cannot be leaders. A good and effective leader must be a good communicator, must have incredible planning and decision making skills besides being good at working with people³.

In the prevailing views on women, men and leadership, female leaders are usually disadvantaged. These common views are influenced by both historical and cultural tendencies. Cultural prejudices about women, men and leadership have moved in

a feminine direction, but these shifts are still scarce. Even though prejudice has decreased, there is still a preference for male leaders. Men's roles have changed much less than women's roles, despite several men moved into an environment in which women predominate⁴.

Going way back into human records, women have always had a role to play in the military.

a) *Combat troops*

It is alleged that during the American Civil War, a number of women fought in the war cross-dressed as men⁵. But it is during the World War I that their role in the military began to clearly show when Russia deployed some female soldiers on the frontline. During the Eritrean-Ethiopian war, it is reported that a quarter of the Eritrean soldiers were female⁶. Many women serve as fighter pilots in many world militaries today.

b) *Medics*

Women in military uniform have served as nurses in the battlefield. In World War II, most nations involved used women as medical personnel to treat and nurse injured soldiers. This role was extremely important as it ensured the troops survival by cutting down on unnecessary fatalities. To this day, most militaries in the world still have trained medics as female soldiers and their role remains unchanged.

c) *Clerical and support staff*

Women in most militaries work as clerical officers, taking care of office paper work and other related logistics. Women have served and still serve as cooks and cleaners in militaries worldwide. These tasks are mostly considered easy and not appropriate for a male soldier in some African militaries where

¹ SCOTT, T. *Science Says Putting Women Into Combat Endangers National Security*.

² FENER, T., CEVIK, T. *Leadership in crisis management: the Separation of Leadership and Executive Concepts*.

³ Ibid.

⁴ SHIELDS, P. M. *Women as Military Leaders. Promises and Pitfalls*.

⁵ GULLEY, H. E. *Women & the Lost Cause: Preserving a Confederate Identity in the American Deep South*.

⁶ AKRESH, R., LUCCHETTI, L., THIRUMURTHY, H. *Wars & Child Health: Evidence from the Eritrean-Ethiopian Conflict*.

sexism is much pronounced⁷. Paradoxically, women have served as drivers in the same militaries.

d) *Factory workers*

During the World War II, it is common knowledge that women served as factory workers where military hardware was being manufactured. They operated machines and worked at the assembly lines to guarantee a consistent supply of weapons to the troops fighting on the frontline. Women still serve in this role in most militaries worldwide although this is no longer considered an exclusive female role.

3 OBSTACLES TO WOMEN ADVANCEMENT IN THE MILITARY

a) *Leadership style*

The military is not an easy place for a woman to belong. Everything about military leadership screams masculine. Most orders are shouted and the leadership style is very aggressive⁸. A lot of women cannot measure up to the kind of authoritarianism expected of military leaders. The need to be unnecessarily harsh and rude while expecting subordinates to take orders kindly seems like something most women cannot stand. Naturally, women are more kind compared to men.

b) *The fairer sex*

A woman is considered just not build for ragged combat where bullets, kicks and fists fly. They are viewed as the fairer sex that needs to be shielded from the harsh reality of what real combat entails⁹. This idea seems to emanate from the interactions most people have with the women in their lives - they are soft, loving and ever warm. It therefore comes as no surprise that most military bosses who are men would never put a woman in harm's way. In that female soldier, they see their mother, wife and even daughter.

c) *Too much pressure and stress*

It is not easy being a boss in the military just like in any other job market. In fact, leadership is not for the faint hearted. Most people thirst for the power that comes with being a leader but only a few can actually cope with the pressure it presents. By being a leader, you're literally responsible for everyone else in your team and it is your job to look out for their welfare. If anything goes wrong, it is often the leader who shoulders the blame and gets to live with the bloat that comes with it. This is certainly a deterrent enough to make most soldiers including women feel contented with the peace that comes with some junior ranks that don't carry so much responsibility.

d) *Inequality at home*

It is tough enough being a career soldier and a mother at the same time let alone being a military boss. In most cultures of the world, a wife often has more responsibilities than the husband even in situations where both are in full time employment¹⁰. Raising children is almost exclusively a woman's business in most parts of the world with the man only chipping in with financial assistance. Therefore, taking up a job as a military boss means adding even more responsibilities to an already overwhelmed woman.

e) *Gender stereotyping*

It is a fact that despite the great advancements made by women in many other fields, there are many men and women who still find it very difficult to take orders from a female boss. Both subordinate and superiors of a female military boss will do whatever it takes to discredit her especially if they don't believe in female leadership. It therefore becomes very difficult for women to attain leadership positions due to the constant risk of insubordination.

f) *The historical factor*

For a very long time, women have been excluded from positions of influence and leadership within the military where they have mostly served in less prestigious roles. This makes them less conversant with the inner workings of the military as they are blind to most of the unwritten rules within the organization. Only recently have most world militaries began appointing female soldiers to minor influential positions. It is therefore considered a risky affair to allow a woman to take charge of a country's military because she is generally considered inexperienced.

g) *Women are their own enemy*

Some female soldiers blatantly argue that a female soldier cannot survive serious combat and shouldn't therefore be deployed to the frontline where enemy fire rages. Serrano perfectly elaborates why women don't belong in the U.S. infantry. In her argument, she states that her opinion is widely supported even within the military itself. In her opinion, the seasoned veterans of war within the military think it is a very bad idea to have women in the U.S. infantry because they know better and have a solid idea of what war actually is. Serrano is a captain in the U.S. army and her doubts in even her own ability don't augur well for the clamor for female leadership in the military¹¹.

⁷ WHITESIDE, A., DE WAAL, A., GEBRE-TENSAE, T. *AIDS, Security & the Military in Africa: A Sober Appraisal*.

⁸ BOE, O., HOLTH, T. *Investigating Correlations Between Personality Traits & Leadership Styles in Norwegian Military Cadets*.

⁹ SCOTT, T. *Science Says Putting Women Into Combat Endangers National Security*.

¹⁰ KRALOVANSKY, WAHL, CH. *Military Women as Wives and Mothers*.

¹¹ SERRANO, L. *Why Women Don't Belong in the U.S. Infantry*.

e) *Women are not courageous enough*

According to Bowman, a recent call of duty on National Public Radio in USA seeking combat-ready women exposed the lack of courage in women. Furthermore, he argues that there is anecdotal evidence that female marines are not rushing to serve in ground combat. This could mean a lack of interest or a sense of fear knowing very well what lies in wait in the battlefield. Unlike men, female are believed to have a greater sense of danger and would therefore avoid dangerous situations when they can. Since military is all about acts of valor and courage, it will take a very long time to see many women at the top of world militaries¹².

f) *The tyranny of numbers*

The politics of numbers cannot be ignored even in the military. Male domination of world militaries means their voice is heard much louder and they can therefore easily advance their own interests at the expense of the women in the force. This fact is much clear in third world countries where almost their entire forces are made up of men. It will be very hard to convince such a force to surrender to a female commander when there are not even a handful of female soldiers around. This lack of bargaining power has seen women stagnate in many world militaries because they are not considered interested enough in military matters.

g) *Lack of government support*

It is a fact that the military and government work hand in hand. For most countries, the President acts as the appointing authority of top ranking military officials. In some countries, such appointments may not be final as they still need to be vetted by other oversight bodies. For any woman to end up at the top in the military, then it is obvious that the President and the military top cream must be supportive of the idea. Unfortunately, this doesn't seem to be the case as very few women hold significant positions in world militaries. It is definitely obvious that inasmuch as some world leaders claim to be feminists, they fail miserably to promote the female interest in the military preferring a pair of male hands to be in charge. It would be very easy for women to rise in the military if most Presidents considered them worthy of appointment to the drive seat as they will serve to inspire more women to join the military having seen the prospect for career growth.

h) *Objectification of women*

It is unfortunate that women are considered as sex symbols and are even treated as such in some world

militaries. Some female soldiers have been raped by their male counterparts in the jungle. This convoluted view of female soldiers as a means of channeling out sexual tension has only served to further discourage women from joining the military leave alone seeking higher military positions. Those who have been abused in the military become the symbol of why women shouldn't serve in the military. Sexual harassment is a serious problem in most militaries where internal conflict resolution mechanisms keep it suppressed from public exposure¹³.

i) *Cultural perception of soldiers*

In some countries, a soldier is the epitome of evil. This is especially the case in unstable democracies where soldiers have committed some of the worst crimes known to man against civilians just to keep a despotic leader in power¹⁴. For most women in such countries, joining the military is considered taboo and the level of machismo paraded within the military will just make any female soldier quit and go into hiding. Moreover, no woman will be forgiven for being part of a military that tortures the very people it was supposed to protect. Instead of becoming social pariahs, most women in unstable countries will not even dare consider joining the military. As a result, it can never be any female leadership in such militaries.

j) *Women are physically weak*

There is a very high risk of attracting abominable condemnation from all quarters imaginable but it is true that women lack the physical strength required of a proper soldier. Most military tasks require exceptional physical strength that most women just don't have.

k) *Privacy and hygiene concerns*

Davis argues that it will be a logistical nightmare to send women into combat zone due to complications related with female privacy and other hygiene matters. Having fought in Desert Storm, he describes extremely harsh living conditions with no privacy at all and concludes a female soldier will find the going tough. Since there is no military in the world made up exclusively of women, it will be tempting fate to mix up male and female soldiers in conditions that offer zero privacy. This need for special privacy and hygiene facilities limits female career growth by denying them the opportunity to prove themselves like their male counterparts and earn promotions¹⁵.

¹² BOWMAN, T. *Looking for a Few Good (Combat Ready) Women*.

¹³ MATTOCKS, K., HASKELL, K., KREBS, E., JUSTICE, A., YANO, E., BRANDT, C. *Women at War: Understanding How Women Veterans Cope With Combat & Military Sexual Trauma*.

¹⁴ ADEAKIN, I. *The Military and Human Rights Violations in Post-1999 Nigeria: Assessing the Problems and Prospects of Effective Internal Enforcement in an Era of Insecurity*.

¹⁵ DAVIS, D. *The Truth About Women in Ground Combat Roles*.

3 FEMININITY AND MILITARY LEADERSHIP – K. M. WALKER'S MODEL

Gender parity has been a critical issue when it comes to leadership and other social affairs, more so, in the military. The issue affects not only lesser countries based on global dominance, but also prominent nations such as the United States, Russia, and the United Kingdom. It has been a long journey in the United States and other nations trying to create the gender equality although there have been inevitable challenges. Men have therefore dominated strong positions in political, social, and economic leadership. As much as this can be seen in many countries, there are efforts put in place to empower women and enable them to have a voice in the society. This aspect is fulfilled by avoiding looking at women in terms of their feminine nature but as special people who can perform a major task in the development of the society.

Karen M. Walker, American psychologist focused on gender and leadership research, developed a model of feminine military leadership.

In her work *A Model for Femininity and Military Leadership*¹⁶ Walker takes us back to the era when women were viewed as nonentities in the society. In fact, they had no say before men. All that they could do was to remain silent and accept to be controlled by men. This was a cultural thing and belief for many people across the globe. The author tries to reflect on the instances of years before the 1940s in the United States and many years past 1940s. The reason for comparing the two eras is to examine the remarkable changes that have been achieved based on gender equity as well as female leadership in the society. Women went through different forms of humiliation but the main focus, in this case, is the leadership race in the military. Before the 1940s, women had limited access to many things including joining the military department. Women were seen as cowards and weak creatures until the experience of world war. This was the time when their true colors became evident in terms of having the potential to serve in the military. Instead of having increased gender discriminations among women; the society began seeing them from a different angle of having a major role in the military.

Today, many women in the United States and other parts of the world have joined military departments and have emerged successful by winning battles. It is not all about being members of the military but taking playing an active role as leaders who control male and female persons in the military base.

The fundamental concept addressed by Walker is the *F-SET leadership model*. In her opinion, this model is based on femininity, but it has a lot to do with that by assessing leadership from a different

angle. This model has a basic meaning behind the acronym. The acronym is basically meant to address the leadership discipline. For instance, “*F*” represents *femininity* or the act of considering the validity of being a valuable female in the society. This is a way of encouragement to all women to stand strong and believe in their capabilities. “*S*” stands for *self-efficacy* which trains females to develop self-esteem and trust that they can as well accomplish great things regardless of their gender. “*E*” for *emotional intelligence*, on the other hand, empowers women to be intelligent enough in controlling their emotions if they are determined to achieve a particular goal. For instance, they have to withdraw fear, anger, and sorrow if they have to become successful military officers. All they need is to have courage, determination, perseverance, and persistence. The last approach of the model is the encouragement of *teamwork* - “*T*” - which calls upon both males and females to work together and overcome factors that may lead to collapsing of military services¹⁷. The F-SET leadership model is significant in the sense that it champions for gender equity, promotes unity through teamwork, improves confidence and self-esteem to female through self-efficacy and considers females as part of the society when it comes to femininity.

Indeed the issue of gender and leadership in the military is a highly controversial one. As seen in the paper, concerted efforts to address gender equality in military leadership have widely been unproductive at a time when gender equality is gaining traction across all social spheres. The underlying issues of maligning women have been widely attributed to socio-cultural aspect of the society. The underlying gender stereotypes continue to dominate top decisions in respected entities such as the military.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING FEMALE CHANCES AT MILITARY LEADERSHIP

1. There is a reason to believe that the military remains one of the last vestiges of male superiority. Massive educational campaigns should be conceived to bring the world militaries to the new world order where women have equal rights and chances as men;
2. Every conceivable effort should be put in action to create role models for aspiring female soldiers especially in developing countries. This can best be achieved by promoting female soldiers to higher ranking positions within their respective militaries;
3. The idea of limiting women’s effective participation in the military due to biological factors has clearly been overtaken by events. In

¹⁶ WALKER, K. M. *A model for femininity and military leadership*.

¹⁷ Ibid.

this modern era where technology defines warfare, it doesn't take much physical strength to have a woman leading a military. Unlike in the past where boots and guns were physically required on the ground, modern warfare is fought with drones and other sophisticated technologies that can be controlled remotely. Unfortunately, this will only work for developed countries with such advanced military capabilities;

4. There should be concerted efforts to bring equality at the home level. How this can be achieved is a challenge worth scholarly debate. However, one thing is certain—if couples could be encouraged to share out equal responsibilities and chores at home, more women serving in the military could find the time required to become a military leader;
5. Seeing that a lack of skills is one of the crippling factors for the failure of female military leadership, more women should be encouraged to acquire the necessary skills by creating a conducive environment for them to learn within the military.

5 CONCLUSION

The gender equality issue is still a major challenge in most militaries worldwide. Save for a few developed countries that have opened up their military to women at all levels, most countries still offer female soldiers a traditional role hence they largely remain a supporting arm of the male soldiers. Indeed several arguments have been advanced for the exclusion of female soldiers in real combat and other senior military positions in some countries. These arguments range from what many consider as sexism to what qualifies as serious food for thought worth exploring. It is really interesting that inasmuch as the emancipation of women is much evident in other careers, their ability is highly doubted when it comes to most militaries in the world.

This paper has discussed the role of women and the obstacles they face all over the world in their attempts at military leadership. It is going to take inconceivable skills to bring female leadership into most militaries of the world due to factors discussed in this paper.

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